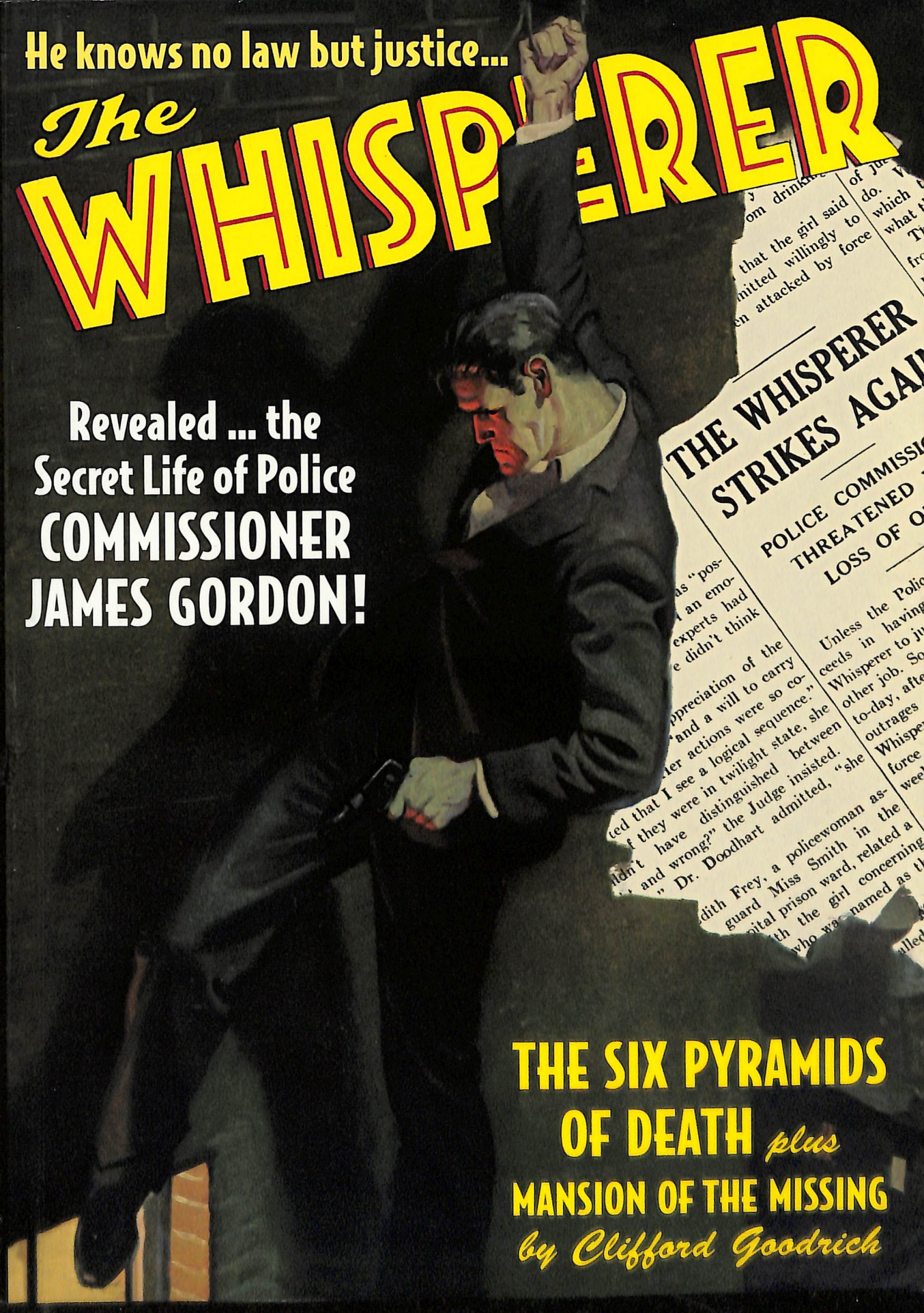
He knows no law but justice...

The WHISPERER

Revealed ... the Secret Life of Police COMMISSIONER JAMES GORDON!



THE SIX PYRAMIDS OF DEATH *plus* MANSION OF THE MISSING

by Clifford Goodrich

The Six Pyramids of Death, Mansion of the Missing *and* The Vampire Deaths

THREE HARD-BOILED ADVENTURES OF

The WHISPERER

by Laurence Donovan and Alan Hathway
writing as Clifford Goodrich

plus

"The Chest of Ching Ling Foo"—a Norgil adventure
by Walter B. Gibson writing as Maxwell Grant

with New Historical Essays by
Will Murray and Anthony Tollin

SANCTUM BOOKS

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THREE AMAZING ADVENTURES OF THE GRAY WRAITH

The WHISPERER

Volume 2

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THE SIX PYRAMIDS OF DEATH

They held a secret as deep as that of the real pyramids—but even death could not stop The Whisperer from striking!

CHAPTER I
THE MAN ON THE WALL

GLITTERING black eyes watched the figure in gray swing from the roof coping of the apartment building. A small dog bared his white fangs and snarled a warning protest.

"Quiet, Brian Boru!"

The command was issued in an eerie, penetrating whisper. The animal crouched on the roof edge, as if prepared to leap outward into space; but he quieted. Only the glowing eyes indicated he was following every movement of the man in gray.

The figure swung on the wall, five stories up. His silent descent toward double French windows in the top row was aided by a light rope ladder. After-midnight lights in a few other windows of the apartment building served only to cast shadows that concealed the man's movements.

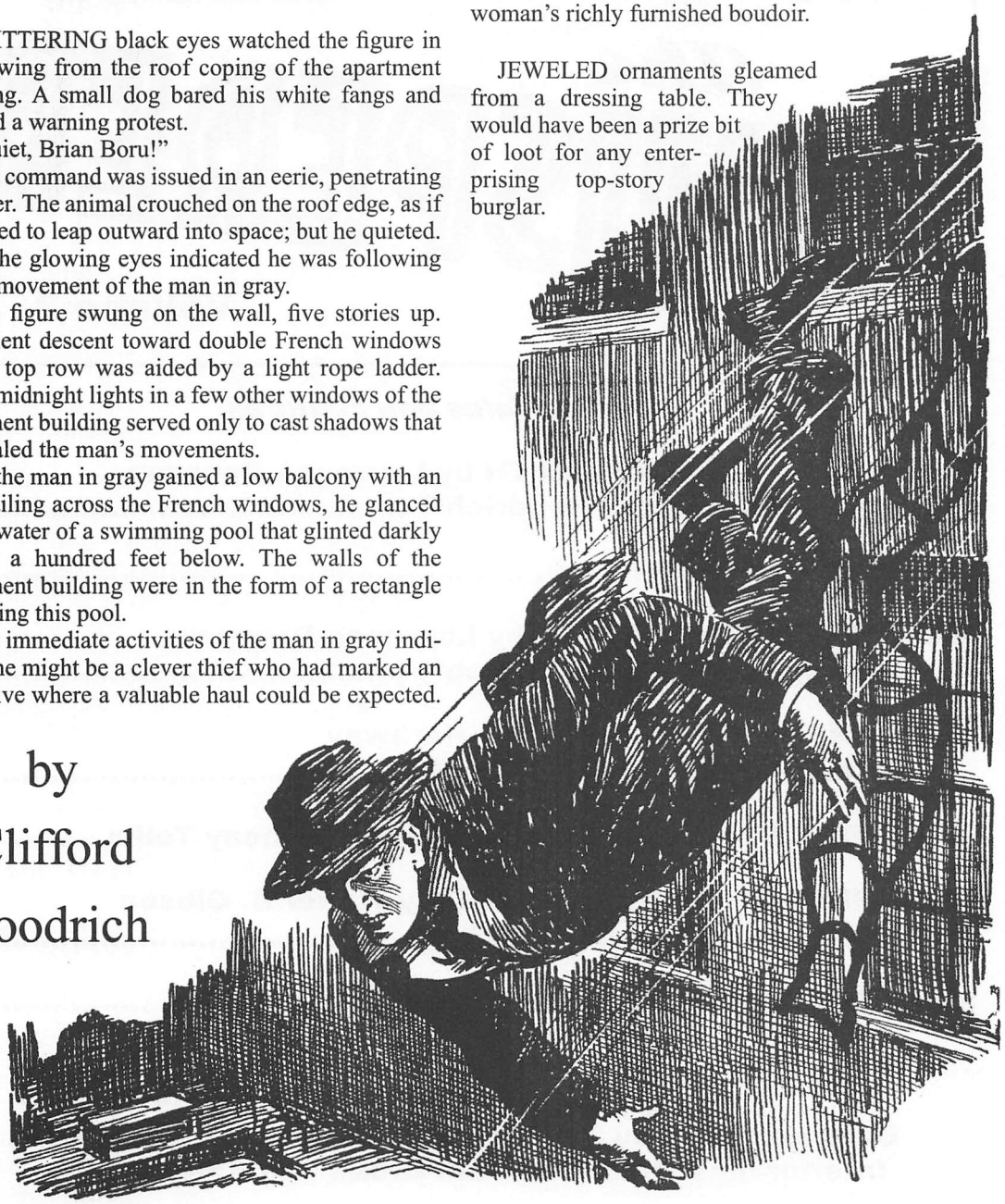
As the man in gray gained a low balcony with an iron railing across the French windows, he glanced at the water of a swimming pool that glinted darkly nearly a hundred feet below. The walls of the apartment building were in the form of a rectangle enclosing this pool.

The immediate activities of the man in gray indicated he might be a clever thief who had marked an objective where a valuable haul could be expected.

by Clifford Goodrich

The room behind the double windows was in darkness. The pencil ray of a flashlight played into a woman's richly furnished boudoir.

JEWELED ornaments gleamed from a dressing table. They would have been a prize bit of loot for any enterprising top-story burglar.



Karlin hesitated the fraction of a second. The Whisperer went over the balcony's iron railing.

But the man in gray made no movement to enter the room. Only a ghostly, whispering chuckle came from his lips as he noted the wealth thus carelessly displayed.

He manipulated the window fastener and discovered that the owner of the jewels had neglected to lock the catch. The man in gray now worked swiftly. Thin wires, invisible in the darkness, trailed beside the rope ladder from the roof coping.

The man held a small metal disk attached to these wires. With less than a minute of effort, he attached this disk to the wall inside the room, where it would be concealed by the window draperies. Again came that eerie, whispering chuckle, which appeared to denote satisfaction.

The curtains were blowing inward as the man in gray started to close the window frame on the thin wires. He was supporting his weight with one hand on the rope ladder, prepared to swing from the small stone balcony, when the room was abruptly illuminated.

An inner door had been opened, and a light button had been pushed without any warning sound. The balcony was suddenly flooded with a luminescence that made it impossible for the man in gray to ascend without revealing himself fully.

The man flattened himself along the stone ledge inside the iron railing. A tall, slender woman had entered the room. She was a strikingly beautiful figure in a silk gown. Her face showed an ivory skin against lustrous black hair.

As she entered, the woman spoke to a man who accompanied her.

"Karlin"—she called him in a husky voice that seemed to hold a thrill of some fear—"do you really believe he will come here? That he will listen?"

The man called Karlin was in evening clothes. He was blonde and taller than the woman, and he touched her shoulder with an assuring caress.

"Don't worry too much, dear," he said, in a tone that proved he was in love with his companion. "His name is John Donaldson, and that means he probably will listen to the right line of reasoning!"

"Oh, I hope so!" the woman replied. "If he only will!"

"Stack Stevens is clever, and it means a good rake-off for him," said the man called Karlin. "I'll stay here with you to make sure everything is on the level."

THE figure of the man in gray outside on the stone balcony had become tense. He had repressed a whispered oath when the name John Donaldson was spoken. His breath hissed over that other name, "Stack" Stevens.

For the man in gray was none other than The Whisperer!

Hunted by the police and by powerful criminals of the underworld alike, The Whisperer had come to this woman's room in his usual mysterious manner

to plant the means of gaining evidence against her—evidence that would send this beautiful woman with the ivory skin to prison for a long term of years.

The disk he had planted inside the window was a dictograph. The thin wires leading to the roof terminated in another room of this same exclusive apartment building.

Now it seemed—unless he was discovered in his precarious position—he was about to learn directly of a plot to "fix" the only witness in a crime that had baffled the authorities of several nations.

For the woman of the ivory skin was known on police records as Countess Vera Langendorf. Accused of selling a flood of counterfeit bonds that had been scattered through several foreign countries, Countess Vera now was at liberty under a high bond.

Countess Vera had been the only one apprehended, though many agents were believed to have taken millions of dollars from sales of the counterfeit securities in foreign cities. And against the countess, the police had only a single witness, John Donaldson, of Montreal, Canada.

The man called Karlin, now in the room with Countess Vera, had presented himself as an admirer and a suitor for her hand. He seemed to be in no way involved in the crime of which she was accused.

When the woman had been extradited to the States, Karlin had loyally followed her from Montreal, had openly declared in court his faith in her innocence.

Outside the French windows, The Whisperer's ghostly chuckle became one of grim satisfaction. So it had been arranged for John Donaldson, the lone witness against the countess, to visit her and "listen to reason."

Karlin had said Stack Stevens would "fix it."

Stack Stevens, known to The Whisperer, was one of the rattiest and crookedest bail bondsmen in the business.

The Whisperer's hand touched the shape of a weapon under his gray coat. His daring attempt to get additional evidence against Countess Vera promised to become a trap that would not only make certain her conviction but would also put her friend, Karlin, and the ratty bondsman, Stack Stevens, into The Whisperer's hands.

Countess Vera and Karlin were now talking in low, tense tones. The Whisperer glanced across the rectangle of the apartment building at a set of darkened windows.

He knew that behind those windows another witness, as invisible as himself, should be hearing all of the conversation in Countess Vera's room.

The light within the room would reveal to that other witness all that might transpire. The Whisperer decided he would be ready to strike.

His colorless eyes glinted as he glanced upward and marked the glowing orbs of his Scottish terrier, Brian Boru. The dog still crouched, motionless, at the edge of the roof.

But as The Whisperer's gaze came back to the pair in the room, his body stiffened and he shrank against the iron railing. The man Karlin was walking toward the window!

He was moving casually, too casually, as if to avert suspicion that he had seen anything.

The Whisperer saw too late what had happened. The breeze through the partly opened window had blown the draperies aside. Perhaps his face had been revealed. A face with an oddly pointed chin, a long upper lip and a blur of whitish hair under a round-brimmed hat.

The blond Karlin was now so close that The Whisperer could see the color of his eyes. They were gray, and they were cold.

Karlin must have warned Countess Vera, for the woman was out of line with the window, having moved quickly to one side. She was watching Karlin, her face tense and strained.

Two more strides and Karlin would have been in position to whip the French windows open. The Whisperer reared to his feet. One hand jerked the rope ladder, freeing it from the fastening above.

The eerie, penetrating whisper hissed from under the long upper lip. It was a command to the dog, Brian Boru.

"Home, Boru! Home!"

THE strange, sibilant voice brought a quick, startled oath from Karlin. He may have been only a peaceful, law-abiding admirer of Countess Vera, but his hand whipped into his pocket and came out holding an automatic pistol.

"Stay where you are!" he grated, harshly.

The French windows were flung open and the automatic centered on the spot where The Whisperer was standing.

"Don't, Karlin! Don't shoot! It'll only bring them down on us!"

Countess Vera had cried out in a shrill, pleading voice.

Karlin hesitated the fraction of a second. His eyes flashed to the woman, and in that brief space, The Whisperer went over the balcony's iron railing.

The loosened rope ladder already had made a slight splash in the dark swimming pool nearly a hundred feet below. It was followed by a resounding splash in the deepest end of the pool, which echoed from the rectangle walls.

On the roof, a small, black shape scurried toward an open skylight. Much as he might have desired to jump after his master, the Scottish terrier, Brian Boru, was obeying the command to go home.

The resounding splash of the falling body in the swimming pool caused lights to flash on in several windows. At other windows where the tenants had already been awake, excited voices called out.

The Hondos apartment building was of an exclusive character. Only the most select tenants could afford rentals that included the enclosed swimming pool, playground and solarium.

Two score or more of these tenants came pouring from ground-floor doors as lights around the swimming pool were flashed on.

The blond Karlin had wasted no time in reaching the playground court. He had heeded Countess Vera's plea, and his automatic had not been fired. He could not have missed hearing the penetrating voice of The Whisperer before he had jumped, but at this time perhaps he was too much of a stranger to the city to have heard of the exploits of this mysterious figure.

"What is it?" "Who fell?" "Somebody committed suicide!"

Excited voices of women tenants shrilled as they crowded around the clear swimming pool. With its other modern conveniences, the pool had underwater lights that fully revealed all of the bottom.

THE blond Karlin moved quietly around the others. None had guessed from which of the several hundred windows above a body might have come. There were lights at several spots. It was summer and many windows were open

A puzzled janitor with a heavy, owl-like face growled at the questions besieging him and walked all the way around the pool. His face became heavier and mystified.

"There ain't nobody fell in!" he grunted.

The blond Karlin judged it was best to make no explanation. It could be clearly seen there was no one in the swimming pool. The Whisperer's light rope ladder either was missed, or it had been taken away.

In a few minutes the puzzled tenants of the Hondos building had returned to their rooms. Within that time the dog, Brian Boru, had reached and scratched on the door of another apartment on the fifth and top floor of the building.

The door opened. An oldish man with a bald head and gray tufts over his ears admitted the dog.

"He made a slick getaway, Boru!" chuckled the oldish man.

He had been watching and had seen that no one had been found in the swimming pool. The Whisperer had vanished.

CHAPTER II
THE UNFIXED WITNESS

AS the search of the swimming pool was being made, The Whisperer was in a position to hear the mystified exclamations. He was inside a black coupé in one of the row of commodious garages of the Hondos apartment building. Here he had opened concealed compartments and swiftly stripped off his outer soggy garments.

The clothes he donned exactly matched those he had removed. He was less than five minutes making this change. The whitish appearance had been washed from his hair, leaving it reddish and bristly. The dusting of a powder changed it again to its blurry whiteness.

The Whisperer chuckled as he slipped from the garage and out to the street. He ascended in the elevator to the fifth floor of an apartment wing opposite that occupied by Countess Vera.

A house porter on the floor addressed The Whisperer as he walked casually toward the door that the dog, Brian Boru, had entered.

"You keep late hours, Mr. Smith," said the porter, pleasantly.

The Whisperer replied in a low tone and his voice was husky, as if he suffered from a cold. It was only when he raised his voice in command or spoke loudly that it became the eerie, penetrating whisper.

The porter, as well as others in the Hondos apartment building, would have been amazed to learn that he had been speaking with the notorious Whisperer. Since he had taken an apartment here, The Whisperer had been known simply as "D. Smith."

A more inconspicuous figure of a man, or more inoffensive-appearing citizen could not have been picked from any crowd. If the porter had heard the name by which the colorless D. Smith was addressed a minute after he had entered his own room, he would have been astonished.

AS The Whisperer let himself in, the oldish man with the bald-topped head and bushy brows exclaimed quickly, "You're not doing so good, Wildcat! I thought you was gone for sure when you took that dive! But get on this, will you?"

The older man was wearing the earphones of a dictograph. He had been using binoculars, with which he had been watching the lighted French windows of an apartment across the rectangle. This was the apartment of Countess Vera Langendorf.

The Whisperer took the dictograph earphones. Neither Countess Vera nor Karlin had discovered the microphone disk hidden under the draperies. If they had, they surely would not have entertained two men who had entered the room as they did.

One of these men was Stack Stevens, bail bondsman, who dealt solely in the racket of "springing" crooks who could afford to pay. Ratty

hair hung over Stack Stevens's ears. It seemed to become his class of business.

The man who had accompanied Stevens into Countess Vera's room was big, bluff and red-faced. He was John Donaldson, the counterfeit securities victim, and the only witness against the countess.

But, if it had been Stack Stevens's plan to bring John Donaldson for an interview with Countess Vera with the idea that he could be bought off, the ratty bondsman had made a slight error. John Donaldson's loud, angry voice boomed over the thin wires of the dictograph.

"You lied to me, Stevens! You said I'd get my money back! I didn't know this woman would be here, and I'll have nothing to do with any crookedness! She's a damn, no-good thief! And she's jolly well going over the road!"

The blond Karlin made a quick, resentful movement. Countess Vera caught his arm.

"No! No, Karlin! You mustn't start trouble here!"

The ratty Stack Stevens confronted John Donaldson as the Canadian started toward the door. He spoke in a sly, sneering tone.

"You don't know the chance you've got, Donaldson. You get as much as you lost; all you have to do is forget to appear against Countess Vera!"

John Donaldson's big hand pushed the bail bondsman to one side.

"I'll have nothing to do with it!" he boomed.

Stack Stevens sneered and wiggled his ratty chin.

"You haven't been in this country long enough to find out what some of the boys think of witnesses who talk too much," he suggested. "You had better think it over, Donaldson!"

Apparently John Donaldson had thought it over. He roared an oath, and one huge fist seemed to squash Stack Stevens's nose into a bloody mass. The bondsman's feet left the floor. He fell over by the wall.

John Donaldson whirled toward Karlin and Countess Vera.

"Countess," he shouted. "You're worse than a thief! If the truth comes out, your friend here will go over the road with you!"

Karlin grated out an oath. His hand went into his side pocket, but Countess Vera clung to his arm.

"I'll have a nice little yarn to tell the judge!" promised John Donaldson, striding from the room.

Stack Stevens scrambled from the floor, blood trickling from his broken nose.

"He'll get the works for that!" he snarled. "As for you, Karlin, it would be a good thing to make yourself scarce around here! I think the boss has his own ideas about how much the countess is worth!"

THIS was an unfortunate speech for Stack Stevens. One of Karlin's hands gripped his collar and the other his trousers. For the second time, the ratty bail bondsman struck the wall with a resounding thud.

"You dirty little double-crosser!" yelled Karlin. "All you've done is make it worse for her! You use one more disrespectful word and I'll break you in two! Now get out!"

The oldish man beside The Whisperer chuckled. "Stack Stevens isn't doin' so good, Wildcat! That Donaldson's a man after my own heart!"

Stack Stevens was slinking through the door of Countess Vera's room, muttering threats that came indistinctly. As the door closed, the woman of the ivory skin buried her face on Karlin's shoulder.

"Oh, Karlin, I'm so afraid!" she sobbed. "I don't know what we'll do! That face at the window! I know it was one of his spies! I've protected him, and now it seems the only price to keep me out of prison is to go to him!"

The blond Karlin held the woman at arm's length.

"You'll never go to him!" he said in a hard, cold tone. "I shall find him tonight, and when I do you will be free to talk!"

"No, Karlin, no!"

"Yes, Vera, that's the only answer! I saw him come into this building early tonight! When I get him, he's going to tell the truth, or I shall kill him!"

"No, Karlin, please!" the woman protested, wildly. "You must find out only the meaning of the golden pyramids! The golden pyramids are the cause of all this!"

Karlin made no promise. He said, "I not only saw him go into Wing D of this building tonight, but when I was down by the swimming pool I saw his face in a window! I'm going to find him!"

The man slid his hand into a side pocket. He kissed the sobbing woman quickly, pushed her aside and went out.

Countess Vera glanced into the mirror, then started pacing the floor. She glanced fearfully at the French windows.

The Whisperer removed the dictograph earphones from his head. As he turned to the older man, he thumbed loose dental plates of an odd shape from his mouth. His long chin appeared to recede suddenly. The jutting upper lip took on a blunt appearance.

When he spoke, his tone was normal; and the husky whisper had disappeared.

"Hellamighty!" he exploded. "We're being let in on something for sure this time, Quick Trigger!"

"If I'm any judge of killers, Wildcat, we're being let in on a murder," said the older man. "How about getting some of the boys up from headquarters and rounding up this Karlin?"

This was strange conversation, a queer situation. But no stranger than many into which The Whisperer had walked.

For with the odd dental plate removed, the man who had been the unassuming D. Smith displayed the fiery countenance of none other than James "Wildcat" Gordon, the great city's fighting commissioner of police.

Wildcat, because he was only five feet five inches in stature, and yet had become known as a battling wildcat during his service in the police department.

The older man he had called "Quick Trigger" was Dick Traeger, a retired deputy police commissioner, now in his sixties. He had been almost a father to Wildcat Gordon, watching him through an army career and later as he fought his way to the commissionership of the department.

Their present strange association had resulted from Wildcat Gordon having been balked in his early efforts to clean up the city as an army officer would have done it.

It had been old Quick Trigger's suggestion that Wildcat adopt a disguise whereby he could get into closer contact with society's public enemies.

He had become known as The Whisperer because of the odd effect on his voice of the dental plates that Quick Trigger had devised.

None but Quick Trigger and Wildcat himself knew the real identity of The Whisperer, who had violently and mysteriously broken many important cases.

But now, when the more cautious Quick Trigger advised having his own police round up the man Karlin, Wildcat's reply was to replace his dental plates.

"We've only started, Quick Trigger," he stated. "You will remain here and keep an eye on Countess Vera. She hadn't broken on who is back of the phony bonds. I've an idea that her boyfriend is now on his way to visit the man behind it all!"

OLD Quick Trigger had not taken his eyes off the beautiful countess as she walked the floor of her room. But now he clucked in his throat and quickly pulled down their own window shade.

Countess Vera had seemed to forget her own windows. She was slipping out of the silk gown.

"Maybe I'd better tail along, Wildcat," suggested Quick Trigger. "What the devil do you suppose they meant by golden pyramids?"

"That's what I'm going to find out," promised The Whisperer, his hand again slipping up their window shade. "And clothes or no clothes, Quick Trigger, keep an eye on the countess! Brian Boru, stay here!"

The Scottish terrier had become alert as he saw The Whisperer was again leaving. He now lay down with a disappointed thumping of his short tail. Where The Whisperer went there usually was the kind of fighting the fierce little terrier loved.

The Whisperer left Quick Trigger beside the window, protesting at staying behind. He let himself into the outside corridor and went down by the back stairs. In doing this, he had so timed his movement as to see the man Karlin emerge stealthily from a door and cross the court toward Wing D of the rectangle.

A night elevator operator was on duty in this wing. The Whisperer had noted this before, but had not thought it was to serve his purpose.

His gray-clad figure glided into the lower hallway as the elevator door was closing. He heard Karlin direct the operator to take him to the fourth floor.

The Whisperer moved with the speed of a cat to the stairs. He was only one flight below when he heard the elevator stop at the fourth floor.

As the door closed, he ascended the remaining flights and sought concealment of a corner alcove at the end of the long corridor on the fourth floor.

The Whisperer had heard Karlin say he had seen the face of a man at a window over the swimming pool. He judged that Karlin might have some trouble locating the apartment from the inside. There was a long row of windows over the swimming pool and court.

Karlin, to his surprise, had disappeared. Perhaps he had quickly found the rooms he was seeking. Or he may have been following The Whisperer's tactics, concealing himself until he could get his bearings on the floor.

For three or four minutes, The Whisperer heard no movement. It was now well after midnight. Even the latest parties evidently had subsided. Soundproof walls and doors virtually made each apartment a separate establishment.

AS the minutes passed and Karlin did not appear, The Whisperer became convinced he had not found the door he was seeking. The Whisperer was going over the strange reference to the golden pyramids in his mind. What relation could this have to the guilt or innocence of Countess Vera?

The woman's evident agreement in wanting to buy off John Donaldson, the lone witness, seemed in itself a confession. Yet she had steadfastly protected the man behind the issuance of the counterfeit bonds that she had sold.

The Whisperer's thought was broken abruptly. He had been moving quietly along one wall of the dimly lighted corridor. Whether a door had opened or someone had been lurking in one of the alcoves, The Whisperer felt the sudden clamping of tremendously strong arms around his throat.

One hand was released long enough to strike him

a solid blow behind the ear. The Whisperer was fast, especially with his feet.

One foot came up and ground a hard heel into his assailant's knee. This brought an oath of pain, but the strong arm holding him was relentless.

The Whisperer used an elbow punch, then attempted to reach for an overhand neck grip on the man behind him. As he did, a cold, damp cloth slapped over his face. It was so held he was forced to breathe.

In two breaths, his consciousness faded. His last thought was that the man Karlin had lain in wait and tricked him.

CHAPTER III
THE WHISPERER MURDER

NOT all the tenants of the soundproof apartments in the Hondos building were sleeping at the time The Whisperer trailed Karlin and was suddenly and mysteriously overpowered.

Shortly after The Whisperer had vanished from the outside corridor, six men were seated at a long table in a room in Wing D.

The man who sat at the end of the table, which was of the finest carved mahogany, was enormously fat, and likewise good-natured. His big body shook as he laughed continuously, which set his thick double chin bobbing up and down.

Though held mysteriously in the early hours of the morning, the meeting might have been that of some solemn board of directors. The man acting as chairman appeared to be the only one present who made a laughing matter of the session.

"We'll call the roll," he chuckled, "beginning with me. Samuel Croy. Present."

The next name he called was that of Rainey.

The man who replied sat next to Samuel Croy. Of all those present, he was the only one showing sleek hair and a blue chin, points that smart policemen immediately set down as the marks of a dangerous type of racketeer.

Except for his hard face and narrowed eyes, Rainey might have been a modestly clothed businessman. The other four men could have been guessed to be in any respectable business. They answered in order as called to the names Dollen, Kurt, Sentor and Jones.

As the almost weird calling of the roll was completed, the fat man, Samuel Croy, called out, "Babe, bring on the cocktails!"

A pretty, blonde woman, with eyes looking like they had been given a hard, green polish, glided sinuously into the room. She was bearing a cocktail tray on which were set golden-yellow glasses.

Samuel Croy's rolling laugh rang out as he observed the other men's reception of the golden goblets.

"Just a little touch in keeping with our business, these glasses, and they go well with Babe's hair," he said.

The blonde woman gave Samuel Croy a smile that still left her pretty face as cold and hard as her eyes.

"A necklace will go better with my hair this month, Sam," she stated, with apparent meaning.

Samuel Croy's laugh rolled again; then he said, "Well, and why not? Close the door as you go out, Babe."

The six men solemnly drained the golden glasses, and the blonde woman disappeared into what apparently was a kitchen of the lavishly furnished apartment.

Samuel Croy got laboriously to his feet, walked over and shot a bolt on the door.

"Don't trust even Babe, huh?" said the blue-jawed Rainey, with a twisted grin.

"I don't trust anyone, any more than we trust each other," said Samuel Croy, and though he laughed again, it was apparent from the faces of the others that they knew he meant it.

"It is now time for the monthly dividends, and we'll have it over with," added Samuel Croy. "Have all brought their pyramids?"

THE blue-jawed Rainey was the first to place a small object on the carved table. It set upon a flat base and reflected the light from sides that could have been nothing less than the purest gold.

Samuel Croy thumped another golden object with a flat base from a great, pudgy hand. It was apparently a replica of that which Rainey had produced. The two glittering figures were in the form of six-sided pyramids, about two inches in height.

The other four men brought out similar pyramids, and when they were in a row on the table, none but a close observer would have said each was a duplicate of the other five. But along the lined edges of each pyramid were wavy lines that might have been small notches.

These weird objects, which seemed to give a serious session a garish touch, must have held some mystic quality. Samuel Croy and Rainey, who apparently was acting as his first lieutenant, were not affected as were their four companions.

Into four pairs of eyes leaped watchful, furtive fear. It was as if each man suspected his neighbors of wishing to possess his own golden pyramid.

Had the furnishings of the long room been less costly, the surroundings cheaper, the whole affair might have seemed to be some sort of burlesque.

The voices of the four men became lower, more guarded in tone. The blonde Babe could be heard moving about in the kitchen behind the bolted door.

Samuel Croy arose and said, solemnly, "You will bring your pyramids. None of us is armed, as was agreed."

"We are not carrying weapons," stated the others, including the blue-jawed Rainey.

Their attitude was as if each man suspected his nearest companion would gladly have slit his throat. Whatever bond had brought them together, it could not have been faith in each other's personal integrity.

Headed by Samuel Croy, the six men passed in single file to one side of the long room. The thick edges of a swaying purple curtain opened to admit the men carrying their golden pyramids. For the space of two or three minutes there was no sound; no voice spoke. Then there was a rustling of crisp paper, as if new banknotes were being shuffled.

Still headed by Samuel Croy, the six men emerged, one behind the other. Each carried a packet of green and brown engraved bonds, ornamented with government seals that left no doubt as to their being genuine. Before these were placed in inside pockets, Samuel Croy spoke again.

"Ten thousand each for the month, as agreed. That is an income upon which we can rely." Then he added with his rolling laugh: "Unless one of you should lose his golden pyramid!"

The men pocketed their weird pyramids in haste.

"When the meeting is adjourned," said Samuel Croy, "it is important that you leave singly by different exits, and that no two of you shall be seen together at any time or place."

HAD the others been watching Rainey, they would have seen a deep, thoughtful glitter come into his narrowed eyes as their golden pyramids vanished.

It was a different look from the furtive fear that seemed to sway the others. His eyes were like those of a wolf watching the approach of some small game from a hidden vantage.

The meeting was breaking up. The men were buttoning their coats over the bonds in their pockets. Rainey suddenly spoke:

"The time has come to learn your wishes concerning the disposal of the woman," he said. "What shall be done with her?"

The man who had answered to the name of Jones, was the smallest, the most timid in appearance of the six. He rubbed his tongue along lips that had suddenly become dry.

"Countess Vera?" he said. "None of us can feel safe until she is out of the way. I mean"—and his chin quivered—"the woman must disappear. If she should be convicted, none of us would be safe. I never feel right until my pyramid is back in the safe-deposit box."

The others nodded solemnly as Jones said Countess Vera must disappear. It was unthinkable that a man of Jones's appearance could really have meant what he had said. But the others seemed to accept his statement as the calm pronouncement of a sentence of death.

"It is the only safe way," agreed Rainey's cold voice. "It may fall upon any of us to see that the decision is carried out."

"But—I didn't mean—" Jones stammered.

There was a hard, insistent rap at the kitchen door. The slightly metallic voice of the pretty, blonde Babe called:

"The cocktails, Sam! Will you help me with them?"

Samuel Croy's rolling laugh indicated it was a good joke that he had almost forgotten their parting cocktails.

"It's always a good idea to drink to our next month's dividends," he said.

His fat hand shot the bolt of the kitchen door; Babe was speaking sharply, saying, "You'd think nobody around here was to be trusted, always locking doors!"

Samuel Croy's voice mocked her speech.

"That's exactly what I think, Babe. Nobody *is* to be trusted too far! I'll take the tray myself."

Glasses clinked and there was the unmistakable gurgling of liquid being poured from a shaker.

The blue-jawed Rainey paced restlessly around the long table. He acted as if he cared more to be gone than to await the farewell cocktails.

The lights went out.

Opaque darkness closed in the room as silently and suddenly as if there never had been any illumination.

Into the breathless hush hissed a high, eerie whisper. A weird, penetrating command that chilled the marrow of men already keyed to furtive fear of each other.

"All of you will stay where you are! The first one to move will meet death!"

One man unconsciously employed a hissing voice himself as he uttered the dread words, "The Whisperer!"

This identification of their uncanny visitor was punctuated by a sharp, gurgling scream. The short cry was throttled as abruptly as it came, yet there was no sound of a silenced gun or so much as a blow.

The tone of mortal agony caused the others to seek some sort of cover. The men blundered about. One could be heard crawling under the long, carved table.

Again there ensued ten seconds of silence. From the door of the kitchen rolled the hearty voice of Samuel Croy.

"A fuse has gone out! Wait until I find one!"

IMMEDIATELY, there was a sound to make the flesh crawl. It was as if a body were being dragged across the floor. At the kitchen door, a tray of cocktail glasses crashed to the floor.

Samuel Croy swore then, his customary laugh forgotten. His feet crunched on the broken cocktail glasses.

It was the blue-jawed Rainey who called out, "Where in hell is the fuse box, Croy?"

Again came the high, sibilant whisper.

"You will hear from me later! Do not attempt to follow!"

Samuel Croy got to the fuse box or the switch, whichever had plunged the room into darkness. The lights flashed on, revealing the blinking eyes of scared men.

The green-eyed, blonde Babe stood near the kitchen door. She was staring at the long mahogany table. The hard, polished eyes were unwinking, centered upon one spot. This fascinated concentration of the woman pulled the gaze of the five men to that spot on the table.

A liquid, scarlet blotch was spreading over the wood. This was where the timid Mr. Jones, the man who had pronounced a death sentence upon Countess Vera, had been standing.

The chair in which Jones had previously been seated was overturned on the thick rug. There was no trail of blood across the floor. There was nothing but the fact that the timid Mr. Jones had vanished, as if snatched through the walls.

"Come on!" barked Samuel Croy. "A body could not have been carried far! Babe, bring the rods!"

The blonde woman darted into the kitchen and returned with a pair of automatics. In the meantime, the blue-jawed Rainey was on his hands and knees, groping about the fallen chair, searching under the table.

His eyes were the narrowest of slits as he arose.

"The Whisperer got the golden pyramid!" he grated. "You know what that may mean to all of us!"

The consternation, even upon the double-chinned countenance of Samuel Croy, denoted that every man there was more concerned with the disappearance of the golden pyramid than with the apparent murder of Mr. Jones. Samuel Croy led the way, followed closely by Rainey, into the adjoining rooms.

There were half a dozen doors. Some led through passages that had been concealed by purple curtains. They discovered no sign to indicate how The Whisperer might have come and gone, or how the body of Mr. Jones, with his golden pyramid, had been spirited from the luxuriously furnished apartment.

CHAPTER IV
THE BODY IN THE CAR

SAMUEL CROY again faced his companions, but four men now, at the long, carved table. The laughter had been erased from his fat face, to be replaced by little streams of pure sweat pouring from his forehead.

"The Whisperer has found us out," he said, in a tone of forced calm. "He has taken one of the golden pyramids. You know what that means to all of us. That pyramid *must* be found!"

Rainey's edged voice gritted, "And this Whisperer must die at the hands of the first man who finds him! Otherwise, we will be at his mercy—and he has none!"

Samuel Croy and Rainey were only confirming the knowledge that had become general in the underworld. The Whisperer had become known and feared as a mysterious figure that made a specialty of snatching ill-gotten gains from the hands of the slickest crooks.

He was reputed to be ruthless. He had never hesitated to kill quickly, mercilessly. The police had often been close on his trail in an effort to bring him to the justice, as most of those in the department believed he deserved.

Yet the underworld was aware that never had a man died at the hands of The Whisperer unless the victim himself had been a murderer.

Samuel Croy arose slowly, mopping his bulging brow.

"We can do no more here tonight, or this morning," he advised. "Each of you should be in his accustomed role at the proper time today. You will leave at once, but go cautiously!"

Rainey was on his feet. Though none were supposed to have weapons, he thrust one of Croy's automatics into a pocket.

"Our only immediate future business is to get The Whisperer!" he stated. "He has been seen, and

often, though he strikes in the dark! But no one has ever seemed able to supply a description! He might even be living among the tenants in one of the Hondos apartments!"

Rainey thus voiced a determination that was agreed to by the other men. Yet it was apparent none had any clear idea of how to go about finding The Whisperer.

The men departed from Samuel Croy's apartment singly. They emerged from different doors of the building.

IT was around the hour of two o'clock in the morning when the strange group of the golden pyramids broke up. It was possibly about this same time that The Whisperer returned to painful consciousness.

One square-fingered hand moved across his aching forehead. He had the nausea of one who has been etherized, with a sweetish, sickening taste in his mouth. But he discovered his dental plates had not been removed.

Even his round-brimmed hat was still in place. But The Whisperer's hands now groped in the darkness and found the rim of a steering wheel. He was seated in a coupé and its familiar outlines informed him it was one of his own cars!

He could see the shimmering of the lake through his windshield, between the drooping trees of a waterfront park. His aching eyes next fixed his location by the skyline of buildings back of the park.

The Whisperer became aware he had not been moved far from the place where he believed he had been attacked by the man he was trailing—Countess Vera's companion, Karlin. For the lines of the Hondos apartment building loomed less than two blocks away.

The Whisperer had had many strange adventures. But this was the weirdest of all his experiences. Could he have possibly been subjected to some influence that had caused him to drive here subconsciously?

His last spot of memory was the unequal battle in the corridor when he had followed Karlin. And Karlin had gone to that corridor with the announced threat to commit a murder.

The Whisperer knew he could not have been very long in the park. His watch told him it would be about three hours until daylight. The park was patrolled by his own police. If his coupé had been spotted here for a great length of time, he would have been discovered.

Because it was the last thing he wanted to happen, being found as The Whisperer by one of his patrolmen, he *whirred* the starter and got the coupé moving.

There was no interference as he reached the street and a minute later turned into the driveway leading to the garages of the Hondos apartment building.

The door of his own garage space was standing open. The driveway light gleamed through the windshield of the coupé. The Whisperer caught the gleam of a weapon on the cushion beside him.

He picked this up with one hand as he swung into the garage. The automatic sliding door closed behind his car. The Whisperer switched on the instrument light and sat quiet for a full minute, striving to assemble some remembered points beyond the attack in the apartment corridor.

He was holding a shiv, a razor-edged knife with a slender blade. How it had come here, he could not recall. Then he rubbed some drying substance on his fingers and held them under the instrument light.

He was looking at freshly dried blood. He saw that the blade of the knife was stained.

The Whisperer climbed from the coupé, conscious of aching muscles. This whole affair had a fantastic, impossible aspect. But his keen senses told him something more—something to test the credulity of any sane mind.

He walked around his car and saw that the lid of the rumble seat was down; but he suddenly started forward, swearing in his whispering voice.

From the slightly open crack of the rumble seat protruded a ghastly hand—the hand of a dead man, with the fingers spread in clawlike fashion. As he slapped open the rumble seat, the hand slipped limply down beside the huddled body of a man inside folded like an empty sack.

By this, The Whisperer knew the dead man had been killed only recently. It must have been much less than an hour, for there was no evidence of *rigor mortis* having set in.

The man had died of a deeply driven stab between his shoulder blades. The Whisperer pulled the corpse into a position where he could see the face.

It was the countenance of an apparently mild and timid man. The drawn mask of the white face told that the man had expected death, but that it had caught him unprepared, defenseless.

Examination of the man's clothes revealed no mark of identity. Every pocket had been emptied. The man's shoes had been removed. The trademarks in his clothing had been ripped out. Even a laundry mark on the shirt had been slashed away.

THE WHISPERER swore softly, again looking at the dried blood on his hands. He had no doubt but that his fingerprints were on the handle of the knife.

Always, when in action, The Whisperer wore protecting gloves of the smoothest skin. But he had

not been wearing gloves when his stained hands had printed that knife!

"Karlin!" he gritted. "This could be the man he was seeking!"

Yet The Whisperer did not quite believe this. His brief study of the corpse had convinced him there was little about the man to mark him as a master brain, criminal, or otherwise. He was of the type that would more likely be a pliant tool for others.

The Whisperer glided to the small exit door of the garage.

It had become clear in his mind that either he had been temporarily insane or that he was being put definitely on the spot.

He came to a quick, a whimsical decision. Peering out, The Whisperer saw that the playground court around the swimming pool lay dark and silent. Earlier tonight there had been a search of that pool after he himself had splashed into it from the window balcony of Countess Vera.

The body *must* not be found in his coupé! It was important that he make immediate contact with Quick Trigger, perhaps change to his identity of police commissioner and set the machinery of the law in motion to round up Karlin and Countess Vera.

The corpse was light in weight as it rested in his arms. The Whisperer closed the rumble seat and stepped with infinite caution from the garage into the playground court. Staying close to the wall, he reached the edge of the swimming pool at its deepest end.

As he glanced around to make sure no witness was visible before he slipped the body into the pool, feet shuffled somewhere in the darkness nearby.

The Whisperer permitted the corpse to go under water without the slightest splash. Then he glided back to the wall close to the garages.

The Whisperer caught his breath, and rubbed his forehead dazedly at what he saw happening. This had begun to take on the semblance of a crazy nightmare. A man whose face was concealed by the darkness was shuffling cautiously toward the swimming pool.

And he was carrying the limp body of another man in his arms! Though there was little light, the swaying of the arms and legs of the man being carried was evidence that he must be dead.

The man with the gruesome burden was near the edge of the pool. The Whisperer glanced up at the long rows of windows. Light still spotted the balcony of Countess Vera's room. Across the rectangle was the darkened window beside which Quick Trigger had been left watching.

The luminous hands of The Whisperer's watch showed it had been only a little more than an hour since he had started on the trail of the man Karlin. The indistinct shadow now putting another corpse into the water could be Countess Vera's faithful admirer.

The water splashed; there were now two dead men in the swimming pool. The other man started quickly back toward the ground-floor door, from which he had emerged.

THE WHISPERER started along the wall, following with a noiseless glide. He had discovered that he had not been disarmed of his own silenced automatics. The guns that spoke in a hissing whisper almost like the sibilance of his own voice. He had one of the weapons held ready.

His previous encounter in the corridor had impressed him that Karlin, if it were he, was not an enemy to be lightly tackled.

But before the other man had reached the door, before The Whisperer could get into position to jam a gun into his ribs, the husky, fear-filled voice of a woman called out from the far side of the swimming pool.

"Karlin! Oh, Karlin! Are you there, darling?"

Countess Vera was running around the swimming pool, and it seemed she had seen the man whom The Whisperer was seeking to capture. The woman's ivory skin seemed to glow faintly in the gloom.

The Whisperer hesitated for the fraction of time necessary for the countess to come around the pool. He saw that the man near the wall had halted momentarily. The Whisperer crouched low and waited.

If this was Karlin and the woman reached him, their conversation would be enlightening. At least some of the ghastly, fantastic tragedy might be cleared up by their speech. He could then trap them both with swift surprise.

The surprise came from an unexpected direction. The butt of a gun, or some other blunt instrument, crashed upon The Whisperer's skull. For the second time, he passed into a black void of unconsciousness.

THE WHISPERER

CHAPTER V
THE MURDERED WITNESS

THE WHISPERER was unconscious only a few minutes, less than ten. He had been struck a stunning blow, but his unseen assailant apparently had fled without waiting to inflict further damage.

The Whisperer confirmed the time by his watch. He was lying close to the wall near the swimming pool. There was no movement of any other person in the playground court. Countess Vera and the man she had sought to reach had disappeared.

The Whisperer reached his own wing of the building without further interference. He had become suddenly apprehensive for the safety of old Quick Trigger. In this extraordinary maze of mystery, he could reach only one conclusion.

It was possible that the identity of the unassuming man in gray, D. Smith, had been discovered to be The Whisperer.

But when he opened the door to his room, the dog, Brian Boru, *thumped* the floor with his stump of a tail. Old Quick Trigger growled from a crouching position beside the window.

"You've been taking plenty of time, Wildcat! I've been gettin' cramps in my haunches sittin' here. Why didn't you come back when you missed that fellow Karlin?"

The Whisperer rubbed his knuckles across an aching forehead.

"If there's anything I've missed about this Karlin, including a licking, you tell me what it is, Quick Trigger."

Quick Trigger stared at The Whisperer's face close to him beside the window.

"What do you mean 'a licking,' Wildcat? Hell's bells! That fellow Karlin was back in Countess Vera's room so soon after you left here, I figured you couldn't have run into him!"

The Whisperer hissed softly.

"One or the other of us is crazy!" he stated. "You saw Karlin come back after I started out to find him?"

"In only a few minutes," asserted Quick Trigger, "and he has been right in that room most of the time. The countess put on her clothes and went out, and Karlin was out of the room for maybe five minutes or so a couple of times.

"He was walking up and down about ten minutes ago, looking like he was worried about the countess being out. Then she came back."

The Whisperer was seeking to get these amazing facts clearly. If Karlin had been back in Countess Vera's room at the time Quick Trigger stated, then he could not possibly have had anything to do with the trick of putting a corpse in The Whisperer's coupé and leaving it in the lake park.

THE WHISPERER had an uneasy feeling that somewhere during the past hour and a half, he had become slightly goofy. He could still feel the stickiness of the dried blood on his hands. He produced a slender, stained knife and rubbed a finger along it.

There had been at least two murders since midnight. Two bodies were down there in the tiled swimming pool. Within a short time, with their discovery in the morning, some of this affair was due to break wide open in the face of his own police department.

The Whisperer had a queer sensation that he could not explain, even to his own satisfaction, how he had gone for a ride with a man who had been recently killed. Quick Trigger had wiped out the possibility of putting the finger on Karlin, or had he?

The Whisperer caught up the binoculars and studied the blond young man who had stuck so loyally by Countess Vera. There was no doubt, from the flush of excitement on his face, that Karlin had been through some tight experience within the past hour. Or was he merely concerned with something that had happened to Countess Vera?

The pair were conversing in low tones—tones which did not reach the concealed disk of the dictograph. Old Quick Trigger was for getting out of the Hondos apartment building, for Wildcat getting back at once into the role of police commissioner when he was informed of the bodies in the swimming pool below.

"I wish I'd never made those danged misfit dental plates!" the old ex-deputy complained. "Sooner or later you're going to be spotted, and I'm only afraid it'll be your own coppers that get you. Then where would you be?"

The Whisperer removed the dental plates.

"Hellamighty, Quick Trigger, there are two dead men in that pool. I wouldn't be too sure I wasn't hypnotized into a murder! On top of that, I'm beginning to think it possible that those pair of lovebirds over there are in the clear on most of this! So I'm going through with it!"

The quick, incisive voice was now that of the fiery Wildcat Gordon. His judgment—that possibly Countess Vera and Karlin might be innocent—was almost instantly upset.

The woman of the ivory skin and the blond man had walked close to the window. Karlin's voice was picked up by the dictograph.

"I tell you, dear, our best plan now is to clear out! This thing tonight has washed the whole thing up, unless other witnesses are produced! They had only John Donaldson to testify you had sold him the phony bonds, and John Donaldson never will testify!"

A surprised expletive came from Wildcat Gordon.

"John Donaldson? No, that other dead man in the pool could not have been the big Canadian, Quick Trigger! He was a smaller man!"

"All the same, Wildcat," said Quick Trigger, "that sweet pair over there are getting ready to clear out! You'll have to move fast!"

Acting upon Karlin's words, Countess Vera was beginning to pull clothing from the closet. The man helped with placing the garments in two suitcases. It was apparent they might be intending to move light, leaving the woman's trunks in the room.

Wildcat found himself under the sudden handicap of not wanting to call headquarters through the Hondos switchboard. Too much tragic mystery already was wrapped up in the night's happenings in the apartment building. As The Whisperer, Wildcat desired to hold to the apartment he now occupied.

Replacing his odd dental plates, the man in gray glided quietly from the apartment. One minute later, he reached a public telephone booth in a drugstore. When he entered this booth, the night clerk nodded pleasantly. The quiet D. Smith had been in the place several times.

The clerk would have been amazed could he have been inside the phone booth. The Whisperer removed his dental plates. It was the voice and authority of Commissioner Wildcat Gordon being conveyed over the wire to police headquarters.

"Sergeant Thorsen!" demanded Wildcat.

AT headquarters, a wooden-faced detective sergeant took the call. The sergeant's square countenance betrayed no emotion whatever as he listened to Wildcat's order.

The sergeant's light eyes were much like those of Wildcat himself. They were gray almost to the point of showing no color.

"Get a squad to Apartment 545 Wing B of the Hondos apartment building!" commanded Wildcat. "You will arrest Countess Vera Langendorf on suspicion of attempting to jump bail! Take the man with her into custody as an accomplice! You'll have to work fast!"

"Yes, sir!" was the single emotionless response from Sergeant Thorsen.

The detective sergeant was Wildcat Gordon's right-hand man. If he had suspected Wildcat might be The Whisperer, he had never hinted as much, even to Wildcat. Sergeant Thorsen had served in the army under Wildcat Gordon. He never questioned an order and he never talked.

Countess Vera had not finished packing when The Whisperer returned to Quick Trigger's side. The Whisperer had an eye on his watch.

He was estimating time and distance from headquarters. The squad under Sergeant Thorsen should be in the Hondos apartment building well before the countess and Karlin got out.

"Now, Quick Trigger, we're going to have a couple of answers out of all this before it's too late," said The Whisperer.

He swung their wide window open noiselessly. Looking down, he could see the dark gleam of the water in the pool that had become the depository for murdered men. Close beside it was the gleaming glass roof of the solarium, in which tenants enjoyed their sunbaths after a swim.

At this time, so far as could be observed, the light in Countess Vera's window was the only one burning.

"What in time are you thinkin' of doin', Wildcat?" exclaimed old Quick Trigger.

"This can't add much to what's already happened," said The Whisperer. "This chair might have come from any of many windows."

He was holding a heavy chair in his hands. Aiming carefully, he hurled it from the window. Five stories down there came the splintering crash of glass in the solarium roof. In the quiet early morning darkness it echoed with the impact of an explosion.

Window lights began showing. Countess Vera and Karlin peered down from their balcony window. Karlin emitted an oath.

"Dammit! Now, we'll have to wait a while! Now what do you suppose happened! Sounded as though someone jumped and landed on the solarium!"

Illumination snapped on around the playground court. The first man to appear was the heavy-faced janitor, pulling on trousers over an old-fashioned nightshirt.

Tenants began appearing, crowding around the shattered solarium. Their babbling voices proved they were beginning to have doubts about the exclusiveness of the swanky Hondos apartment building.

The bewildered janitor had found the chair that had crashed from above. Faces were turned upward, but there was no possible chance of locating the spot from which the chair had come.

Karlin had wisely snapped out the lights in Countess Vera's room. But their voices could be heard murmuring over the dictograph.

Someone turned on the underwater lights of the swimming pool. A woman screamed and fainted. A bedlam of shocked voices arose.

"There's a body! We must have missed whoever jumped earlier tonight!" exclaimed a man. "By Heavens! There's another one!"

The Whisperer and Quick Trigger heard Karlin's low tone of apparent surprise.

"Two of them? What could it mean?"

His words indicated clearly that Karlin had expected to have one body discovered in the swimming pool.

The janitor and two other men got one soggy body onto the tiling above the pool. The Whisperer could see the throat of this corpse had been slit. He was not the man who had been in the coupé.

The second body was pulled onto the tiling. Male tenants were getting horrified; screaming women ran out of the playground court.

It was then that another shocked cry rippled up to The Whisperer and Quick Trigger.

"By all the saints! There's another one!"

There was a third corpse in the pool! As it was brought from the water, Quick Trigger bit off an oath.

"There goes the phony bond case, Wildcat!"

THE third body was that of the big Canadian, John Donaldson. The bright lights revealed that the man's head had been battered in. Many blows had been struck, for the skull was a bloody mass.

The man Karlin had told Countess Vera that John Donaldson, of Montreal, never would testify. Had the woman of the ivory skin known what he had meant? It now appeared that she might not have been informed of the truth.

"Karlin! Karlin!" her husky voice came over the dictograph. "You didn't tell me all of it! Oh, what are we gong to do?"

"Sit tight until we get the chance and slip out!" stated Karlin. "Hold onto our nerve!"

Terror-stricken tenants had become a milling mass in the playground court around the swimming pool. Someone had gone to call the police. The Whisperer knew Sergeant Thorsen's squad must already be entering the apartment building.

The Whisperer moved with haste. It was a matter of but a minute or two until his whole appearance had undergone a complete transformation. As The Whisperer he had been an inconspicuous citizen, a man so quietly of the average type, he never would have been picked out of a crowd.

Now his stocky five feet five was clad in a serge suit of a startling shade of blue. A red necktie matched colors with a glowing carnation in his coat lapel. Shoes that had been gray had become a brilliant yellow.

Wildcat Gordon's square-jawed, good-looking face now was topped by an army hat, which he had pulled jauntily over one eye. He was in every detail, the complete antithesis of the notorious Whisperer.

"Stick here, Quick Trigger!" he commanded. "I've just been thinking! The last time we saw John Donaldson alive, he had just knocked the tar out of that rat, Stack Stevens!"

CHAPTER VI
THE TRAPPED BONDSMAN

AT the moment The Whisperer became transformed into the tough ex-army officer and commissioner of police, Wildcat Gordon, a squad of headquarters men, headed by Sergeant Thorsen, came into the corridor of the fifth floor in Wing B of the Hondos apartment building.

The wooden-faced sergeant quickly located the door of Apartment 545. But before he had reached it, a figure with stringing, ratty hair came from one of the elevators.

Stack Stevens, the bail bondsman, had been tipped off that his bail client, Countess Vera, was about to be arrested. It was one of the thorns in Wildcat's life that bail bondsmen and shyster lawyers of the Stack Stevens type were able to get inside stuff from headquarters.

Wildcat had made every effort to clean up this feature, but he was handicapped by the activities of men who had opposed his appointment as commissioner.

Not the least of these was Mayor Van Royston himself, a reform executive, but too soft-handed to agree with Wildcat's roughshod methods of dealing with crooks.

The deputy commissioner, Henry Bolton, had long wanted the commissioner's desk. When the reform element had virtually forced the appointment of Wildcat Gordon, a clash of authority had resulted. Wildcat had been compelled to employ army discipline and adopt the role of The Whisperer to break many important cases.

So Stack Stevens had been tipped off to Countess Vera's arrest. The ratty bondsman pushed a snarling, ugly face close to Detective Sergeant Thorsen. The nose broken by John Donaldson and his purpled eyes had not added to his appearance.

"What's the idea, Thorsen? What's the idea?" said Stack Stevens. "I just heard you had an order to pinch the countess in the bond case!"

"You've just heard something that ain't any of your damn business!" stated Sergeant Thorsen. "So you'd better move that ugly pan of yours before you get it mussed up some more!"

"You can't talk that way to me, and you can't pinch anybody on suspicion of bail jumping unless I make the complaint!" snarled Stack Stevens.

"Wildcat Gordon's still running the department!" rapped Sergeant Thorsen.

"Wildcat Gordon, huh? It's always Wildcat Gordon!" howled the bail bondsman. "It's about time someone took the starch out've your cocky, damn fool commissioner! And this is the time when no Wildcat Gordon or anyone else is going to can my client without my making a complaint!"

THE stringy-haired Stack Stevens was whirled abruptly on his heels. A hand, about as gentle as a steel claw, hooked into one shoulder. The cold eyes of Wildcat Gordon surveyed the ratty bondsman's battered face.

They were the kind of eyes that have long distinguished law-enforcement officials in Texas since the days of the Texas Rangers. Texas eyes, and uncompromisingly cold and deadly.

"Keep out of the way, Stevens, or you may lose an ear!" snapped Wildcat.

"You—you low-life army scum!" squawked Stack Stevens. "You know better than to try a pinch like this without a proper complaint! You've about reached the end of—"

Stack Stevens ceased speaking on a yell of pain. Wildcat had dumped him suddenly on his back, the flat of his hard hand slapping behind one of the bondsman's ears.

Stack Stevens scrambled to his hands and knees. Perhaps he judged it would be wiser to stay in that position.

"You'll pay plenty for that!" he howled. "And I'll have a habeas corpus to get Countess Vera out of your hands before you get the door locked! Besides that, I'm suing you for assault and—"

"Sergeant," interrupted Wildcat, "put the bracelets on our excited friend here! So you think you are going to get your client out on a habeas corpus writ, huh? Well, Stevens, you can begin figuring what kind of writ will open the door for you to walk out!"

Stack Stevens's ratty mouth flopped open. He stared unbelievingly at Wildcat Gordon.

"You're arresting me? Me?" he yelled. "I've got my rights, I have! Take your hands off me, Thorsen!"

Detective Sergeant Thorsen did as he was told, but not until the bondsman's wrists were locked in handcuffs. At this moment the door of Countess Vera's apartment opened.

The woman of the ivory skin stood there, staring speechlessly at Stack Stevens. The grim face of Karlin appeared at the woman's shoulder.

"What's all this?" demanded Karlin. "Did I hear someone say the countess was to be arrested?"

"No! No!" shouted Stack Stevens. "Nobody's going to be pinched! There ain't any case of bail jumping, and this whole thing is an outrage! I *demand* to be released!"

Wildcat Gordon looked at Karlin and the woman. His mouth was a grim line

"Your game's up, Karlin," he stated, quietly. "Your crooked bondsman here is under arrest on suspicion of the murder of John Donaldson. I've decided to hold you and Countess Vera as material witnesses!"

There was a moment of silence. Karlin's face was desperately white. Countess Vera thrust the back of her hand against her even teeth.

"John Donaldson murdered?" muttered Stack Stevens.

"That's the answer, Stevens," stated Wildcat. "The last time he was seen alive was in Countess Vera's room! Being an honest man, he didn't take kindly to your fixing the bond case, so he socked you plenty!

I believe Judge Patrick Kyley will consider the evidence sufficient to hold all of you without bail!"

COUNTESS VERA and her friend, Karlin said nothing as Wildcat proceeded to relate in brief detail the conversation that had taken place with John Donaldson.

They had no means of knowing how this remarkable evidence had come into the hands of this flamboyant police commissioner with his jauntily cocked army hat.

By this time, another police squad had reached the playground court where the ghastly figures of three dead men lay on the bright tiling. Wildcat noted that a shrewd, calculating look had come into the cold eyes of the man Karlin.

Perhaps Karlin had a suspicion of how the conversation of John Donaldson had been heard. But the man was tight-lipped, saying nothing.

For probably the first time in his crooked career, Stack Stevens was silent. He was rubbing his broken nose. When the prisoners were taken down into the court, he stared with loose lips at the murdered John Donaldson.

The homicide squad was making its checkup on the tenants of the Hondos building. It was quickly discovered that none of the residents could—or would—identify the two bodies found in the pool with the slain witness in the bond case.

The police had made an effort to clear the court, but on Wildcat's arrival he reversed that order, to the amazement of the homicide men.

"Let them all have a look," he instructed.

The detectives had ascertained that the corpse that had been in The Whisperer's coupé bore no mark of identification.

Wildcat studied the situation with a grimly puzzled air when he found that the second murdered man placed in the pool could not be identified.

This second murder victim was dressed in neat business clothes. The shoes had been removed and the trademarks cut from the suit. The man's throat had been slit with a knife.

The heavy-faced janitor asserted that neither one of the men had ever been tenants in the Hondos apartment building. Other tenants confirmed his statement. Wildcat estimated there were probably some three hundred families occupying apartments in the big building.

A huge fat man with a double chin appeared. He had a robe pulled over a pajama coat and was wearing hastily donned trousers. He said he was Samuel Croy.

"This is a terrible thing to happen here!" he declared. "I am the owner of the Hondos apartment building, though that is not generally known. I've never seen any of these three men before. I demand the police make a thorough cleanup of this, and I'd say right now the placing of the bodies in the Hondos pool is probably a deliberate effort of rival apartment owners to injure our rentals!"

Wildcat Gordon accepted Samuel Croy's statement without comment. He asked only if the owner had been aware that Countess Vera was occupying an apartment.

"I knew of it, yes," said Samuel Croy. "As a matter of fact, I only learned of it yesterday. I was planning to give her notice to move out today. All of our tenants are highly respectable."

At this moment, Wildcat noticed a man with sleek, black hair and a blue-shaven jaw walk slowly around the swimming pool. There was a little cry from Countess Vera, who, with Karlin, was about to be taken by the police.

Wildcat saw Karlin's grimly set face. Though he was handcuffed, Karlin moved suddenly, as if to intercept the blue-jawed man. The quickly clutching hand of Countess Vera on his sleeve halted him.

Wildcat swung on his heels. He appeared not to have noticed this quick byplay. The blue-jawed man continued on around the pool. A minute later, Wildcat was told by Samuel Croy that the man of the blue-shaven jaw was not a tenant of the building.

"He's one of a dozen or more people that must have come in from the outside when the police got here," complained Samuel Croy. "I ask you, Commissioner, to have the place cleared as quickly as possible."

Wildcat gave no further indication of interest as the blue-jawed man disappeared into an areaway at the end of the swimming pool. The commissioner was thinking fast.

"Perhaps you've got some inkling of who might have a motive for injuring the reputation of your apartments?" he said to Samuel Croy.

"I would hesitate to name anyone," stated the fat man, "but I've heard a rumor among the tenants that the outlaw known as The Whisperer sometimes takes on jobs like this."

Wildcat's Texas eyes gave no hint of the effect this unexpected statement may have had.

"It might be," he replied. "The Whisperer is reported to be a bad egg all around."

AT this juncture, a heavy man with a hooked nose over a ridiculously small and unpleasant mouth was talking with the handcuffed Stack Stevens. He was Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton and he had just come on the scene. He walked over to Wildcat.

Deputy Bolton had two pet abominations: One was the notorious Whisperer, whom he had sworn many times to trap, and never had. The other was Wildcat himself. Deputy Bolton's round mouth was wrinkled in disapproval.

"Commissioner Gordon," he said, "the arrest of Stack Stevens looks bad to me. He has powerful friends, and a murder charge may put the department in the hole without some more definite evidence."

Wildcat's army hat was pulled low; he looked at his deputy from one half-closed eye.

"Henry," he said, with a hard grin, "it has been mentioned that The Whisperer may have some connection with these killings. You may go about your usual assignment of rounding up The Whisperer. For your information, Stack Stevens was heard to mention that John Donaldson would get the works if he did not listen to reason. So John Donaldson got the works."

"There ain't any witness to any such nonsense!" yelped Stack Stevens. "I'll be out of jail and have my client out before ten o'clock this morning! Wait until Mayor Van Royston learns his department is threatened with a suit!"

"I'll be waiting," stated Wildcat cheerfully. "Sergeant Thorsen, you will follow instructions as to these three prisoners!"

"I hope you understand that I'll have no hand in this detention!" flared Deputy Bolton. "You've got nothing on which to lock up a bondsman in performance of his business!"

"No, you'll have no hand in it, Henry," stated Wildcat. "And I'd lock up you or Mayor Van Royston himself if necessary to break a murder case. You can run along, Henry, and peddle that to his honor."

Another man of businesslike appearance was talking with Samuel Croy at this moment. Wildcat noticed this man's face was ashen, that his hands shook. Samuel Croy and this man left the playground court together.

Wildcat issued another order to Sergeant Thorsen.

"See that a double guard is put over the room of Countess Vera and that no one is permitted to enter, not even the owner of the apartments! Nothing whatever is to be disturbed in that apartment!"

He was thinking of the disk concealed by the window. By this time old Quick Trigger would have pulled loose the wires leading to the apartment of the quiet D. Smith.

CHAPTER VII
WILDCAT PLANS AN ESCAPE

ABOUT an hour after dawn that same morning, a diminutive, doll-like girl with clustering black curls and dancing little devils in her dark-blue eyes, set a steaming coffee pot on a kitchen table. Rather, she slammed it down with a bang that rattled the dishes and spilled some of the coffee.

"Out all night!" she said, with scornful emphasis. "And me waiting with hot coffee, as usual! A fine thing it is for a woman to have a high and mighty police commissioner for a boarder, and a grandfather who can't forget he's been a cop!"

Wildcat Gordon tipped back his chair, erected his yellow shoes to the corner of the table and yawned.

"The child says she's a woman, Quick Trigger," he grinned. "She should be sent away to school where she won't have to associate with cops."

The girl's blue eyes sparkled fire. One small hand pushed Wildcat's feet off the table.

"If you'd ever been to school, you'd have learned some manners!" she said. "It might interest you, Mr. Commissioner Wildcat Gordon, to know that Mayor Van Royston has called half a dozen times in the past hour!"

"He'll call again, I suspect," smiled Wildcat. "In the meantime, children shouldn't stay up all night."

The girl tossed her black curls and flounced from the kitchen. Old Quick Trigger wore a tired smile. There was a continuous verbal duel between Wildcat and his granddaughter, "Tiny" Traeger. But the wise ex-deputy had known for a long time that Tiny was madly in love with this same Wildcat.

"I wouldn't want Tiny to ever find out, Wildcat, that you're The Whisperer," said Quick Trigger. "I don't think we've done so good on this case. Now the mayor's all stirred up again, and I don't see how you're going to use that John Donaldson evidence against any of the three you've got locked up. It puts you on the spot where The Whisperer trick is bound to come out."

A cold, reflective light appeared in Wildcat's Texas eyes. Old Quick Trigger had stated the truth. The evidence obtained by the dictograph could hardly be used in court without exposure of the method employed in getting it.

Mayor Van Royston would be raging, and by this time, someone would have set legal wheels in motion to unlock the doors for Stack Stevens.

The telephone buzzed sharply. Wildcat replied over the kitchen extension. His own apartment was in Quick Trigger's penthouse on top of a loft building near the lake. He had resided there since his return from the army.

The voice coming over the telephone was so strident with anger and excitement that the words could be plainly heard by Quick Trigger.

"What the devil and all are you putting the department into, Gordon?"

IT was Mayor Van Royston, the reform executive with his soft-handed ideas and a flair for presiding at public affairs, rather than backing up the open battle his unwanted police commissioner was waging on the underworld.

"Good morning, your honor," replied Wildcat

cheerfully. "You say the department has been put into something?"

"This is no time for your crude sense of humor, Gordon!" complained the mayor. "Deputy Bolton has learned that Stack Stevens has an absolute alibi which clears him of any possible connection with the murder of your bond witness, John Donaldson!

"In fact, from the findings of the medical examiner and other facts, Stevens must have been in company with men of your own department when the Donaldson death took place!"

"From the promptness with which he got the news of Countess Vera's arrest, I suspected that!" rapped out Wildcat. "And when I find out which coppers are ready to support that alibi, I shall personally boot them off the force!"

"We'll see about that, Gordon!" said the irate mayor. "In the meantime, habeas corpus papers are here for the release of Stevens! I've instructed Deputy Bolton to permit service of the papers at the morning show-up!"

Mayor Van Royston

Wildcat drooped one eyelid in a slow wink at Quick Trigger.

"There will be some difficulty about that, Mayor," he stated, calmly. "Unfortunately, Stack Stevens will not be in the morning show-up. I think he has gone away for the day to some little place in the country. I'll be in my office at ten."

Wildcat quietly replaced the receiver over the mayor's sputtering voice. Old Quick Trigger looked at him with a shade of doubt in his face.

"In the country again, Wildcat?"

"Far enough from the hunting ground of shyster lawyers and one or two political highbinders," replied Wildcat.

Old Quick Trigger frowned with apprehension. The retired deputy would back Wildcat to the last ditch, but he constantly feared that some time the fiery commissioner would go too far.

An order to Sergeant Thorsen had sent Stack Stevens to the little place in the country. Because of the springing of important prisoners by the usual system of court papers, Wildcat had adopted his own plan of holding a wanted man until he was ready to take action.

The probably outraged Stack Stevens was at this moment occupying a cell with a nice view of the river and a cow pasture. A friendly sheriff in an outside county had learned it was to his advantage to cooperate with Commissioner Gordon. No papers would be served to free the ratty bail bondsman this morning.

Quick Trigger kept shaking his bald head dubiously. He wanted again to know how Wildcat expected to get anywhere without exposing the visit of The Whisperer to the Hondos apartment building. He stared, unbelievingly, at Wildcat's calm reply.

"Countess Vera and Karlin are over in the old Fiftieth Precinct jail. I'm very much afraid there will be a black mark against the department, Quick Trigger, when tomorrow morning's papers report a jailbreak."

"Sometimes I think you're a little bit crazy, Wildcat," said Quick Trigger.

"I've more than suspected it myself," Wildcat grinned. "But when rats have been trapped and then turned loose where do they go? Back to the holes they know best!"

A slow smile came over Quick Trigger's face.

"And this countess and her sweetie, you think, will make for the protection of the man behind the fake bond sales?"

"Well, perhaps not for his protection. But I've an idea if Karlin is turned loose, he will try to finish the revenge murder he had in mind last night. Yes, Quick Trigger, there's going to be a jailbreak. Right now you'd better get some sleep. Tonight you are driving a taxi."

WILDCAT GORDON'S appearance at his office at ten o'clock was the beginning of a tough day, mostly for Deputy Henry Bolton, Mayor Van Royston and a few others. A shyster lawyer, with papers for Stack Stevens's release, was personally and roughly escorted from Wildcat's office, with one ear badly disarranged.

Within an hour, court papers were being served to Wildcat himself, demanding his appearance in court at three o'clock that afternoon to show cause why he had not produced the imprisoned bail bondsman, Stack Stevens.

"You've got yourself into this, Gordon!" declared Mayor Van Royston, strutting about in the perfection of morning striped trousers and spats, with his tall, silk hat, ready for a luncheon reception at noon. "When you get tangled with the courts, even your friends in the Reform Party can't save you!"

"Don't get gray hairs over it, Mayor," said Wildcat, with an enigmatic grin. "Possibly I don't intend to tangle with the court."

"You wouldn't dare to defy a court order, Gordon?"

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Samuel Croy, the fat owner of the Hondos apartment building. He made a direct complaint.

"So far as I can discover, the police are getting nowhere in this terrible affair!" he said. "Up to now, there hasn't even been an identification of two of the dead men! A dozen of my best tenants have given notice!"

Wildcat's yellow shoes remained quietly on the corner of his desk. He licked a petal from the red carnation on his coat lapel. His jaunty, almost gaudy appearance gave no suggestion of the bad night he had been through.

"Heard any more suggestions about The Whisperer?" he inquired.

"Now that you mention it, yes, I have," said Samuel Croy. "Two of my tenants say they heard a whispering voice in the playground court."

"Two of your tenants are probably liars," stated Wildcat. "But have them here tomorrow morning; we'll look into it."

"Tomorrow morning?" gulped Mayor Van Royston. "I think this is something that demands immediate action!"

"Too bad, but I have a date in court this afternoon," smiled Wildcat. "Tomorrow morning, Croy, bring your tenants over."

Whereupon, Wildcat arose, walked over to Sergeant Thorsen's desk and began talking to his chief lieutenant in a low tone. Samuel Croy waved his pudgy hands and continued his complaint into the ready ears of Mayor Van Royston.

WHEN three o'clock in the afternoon arrived, an irate judge, whose position depended solely upon political influence, had summoned reporters and photographers. The lesson he was about to teach Wildcat Gordon was the kind of publicity the judge most desired with certain powerful figures in the city.

Newspaper cameras were permitted to be set up in the court. Mayor Van Royston, in all of his sartorial glory, was present. A battery of lawyers, of the shyster type, were on hand. Deputy Henry Bolton sat in the back of the courtroom, an unpleasant grin on his small, round mouth.

The court bailiff hammered the crowded courtroom to silence.

This would be a big political stroke, the expected discomfiture of Wildcat Gordon. For the word had been passed out that the court already had decided to insist upon a jail penalty for the fiery commissioner of police on a charge of contempt.

There came only one setback. Wildcat Gordon failed to appear at three o'clock. The reason for this was simple enough. Wildcat was stretched in the shade of a tree outside the city limits, having a restful nap against some activities he had planned for the coming night.

Old Quick Trigger had his back to a tree nearby, and he was snoring noisily. Fiery Wildcat Gordon did not so much as dream about the order for his arrest issued by the political judge.

It was about two hours after sunset when Commissioner Wildcat Gordon strolled nonchalantly into the musty office of the Fiftieth Precinct jail. Only the desk sergeant and the jailer were on duty. Crime had long since moved farther downtown, leaving the once-active precinct station slumbering in the sticks.

CHAPTER VIII
THE WHISPERER STRIKES

"GREAT glory, Commissioner, I thought you'd be—"

"All neatly locked up in one of my own jails, Sergeant?" finished Wildcat Gordon, with a grin. "I may be yet. Who can tell?"

Sergeant McClosky was an old-timer, but he was a hard-bitten veteran of the force. The jailer, likewise, was close to the age of retirement. They promptly grinned back at the commissioner. Wildcat was a copper after their own hearts.

"Thought I'd drop around and make sure my deputy, Henry, hadn't found some excuse for opening the doors for the countess and her boyfriend," said Wildcat. "I may take a doze on one of your cots, Sergeant. I imagine I have visitors over at my place."

Wildcat had no doubt but there were visitors now at Quick Trigger's penthouse—visitors with a bench warrant for his arrest. For the night editions of the papers had been scareheaded with the story of Wildcat Gordon's defiance of a court order.

"Sure enough, there's a cot waitin' for you, Chief," said Sergeant McClosky. "Ah, if anything happens, me and the jailer don't know anything about where you might be."

Wildcat thought ruefully that he would have to see that the veteran sergeant and jailer were well looked after as the result of their loyalty. In the meantime, it was just too bad they had to be put in a kind of spot.

Wildcat yawned and passed into the jail's locker room, where two iron cots were set up. Sergeant McClosky and the jailer grinned at each other as they heard one of the cots creak with the commissioner's weight.

"Now, there's a cool head for you," said the sergeant. "Damn! I wish I was twenty years younger! I'd like to travel with Wildcat Gordon, rather than

be pensioned off here where nothin' happens!"

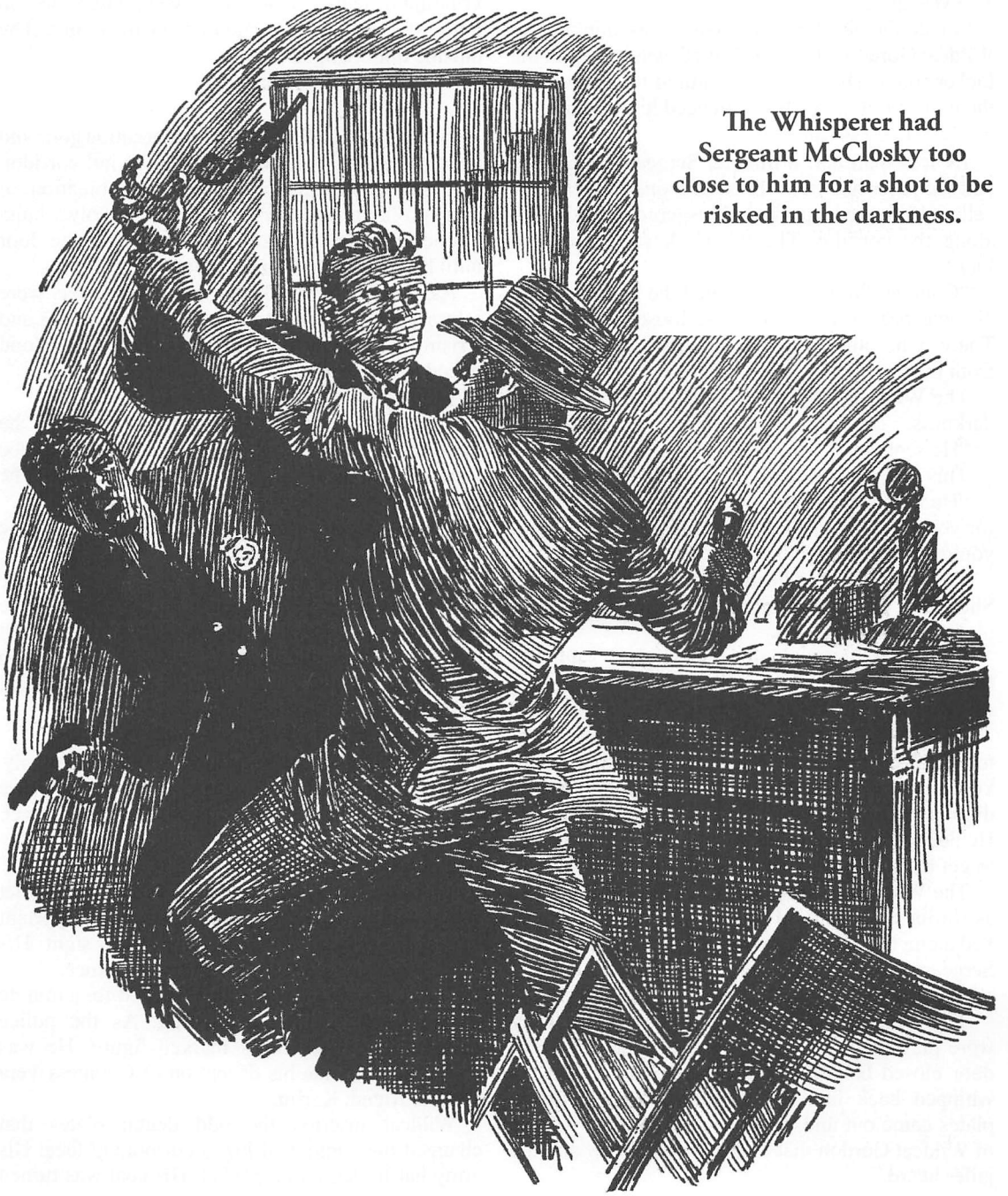
Sergeant McClosky was slightly in error about nothing happening in the old Fiftieth Precinct. Wildcat Gordon had been in the locker room perhaps ten minutes when all the lights winked out.

The sergeant and jailer both swore with surprise. Their oaths were abruptly cut off by a penetrating, sibilant whisper that filled all the old jail.

"Don't move! Lift your hands!"

It was an eerie, chilling order. It was made more emphatic by the cold point of a gun lightly touching the back of Sergeant McClosky's neck. The sergeant's own holstered gun was lying on his desk. A quick hand reached in the darkness and removed it.

The jailer swore and grittily made a reach for his revolver. But he, too, was at a disadvantage. From the position of that icy whisper of command, he knew The Whisperer had Sergeant McClosky too close to him for a shot to be risked in the darkness.



The Whisperer had Sergeant McClosky too close to him for a shot to be risked in the darkness.

The jailer started to sidle away from the desk. The cold muzzle left Sergeant McClosky's neck. The jailer heard no movement before steel-strong fingers gripped his wrists.

His revolver exploded toward the ceiling; the jailer was disarmed with a viselike twist and he was whirled about, facing the corridor leading to the row of cells.

Again a weapon was pushed into Sergeant McClosky's back.

"Walk ahead of me!" came the sibilant voice of The Whisperer.

No doubt Sergeant McClosky was thinking of Wildcat Gordon who, he believed, was asleep in the locker room. The sergeant ventured to cry out, but the gun's point in his back silenced his warning.

IN less than half a minute, Sergeant McClosky and the jailer had been thrust into one of their own cells and locked up. The Whisperer moved back along the corridor. The jailer's keys grated in a lock.

"Countess Vera!" commanded the hissing voice. "I have been sent to turn you loose! Don't talk! There is no other way, if you hope to save Karlin from the chair!"

The Whisperer heard Countess Vera gasp in the darkness.

"He sent you?"

This was no time to go into details.

"He sent me! A taxicab is waiting at the corner for you and Karlin! I will hold the police here until you make a getaway!"

Countess Vera had heard that icy whisper before. She said, "Then he sent you to my window last night? It was you?"

"I was at your window last night," said The Whisperer. "But the boss will explain. Tell the taxi driver where to take you, that's all."

The Whisperer judged this was no time to attempt to get the name of the boss he was supposed to know. He led Countess Vera to Karlin's cell. But he did not wait for a possible argument with the man. He believed Countess Vera would be smart enough to get Karlin away.

The Whisperer heard the woman's sobbing voice as Karlin's arms closed around her. Their feet shuffled along the jail corridor toward the outer entrance. Sergeant McClosky and the jailer started shouting.

"Wildcat! Chief! Look out! The Whisperer!"

The Whisperer emitted a ghostly chuckle. They were playing directly into his hands. As the outer door closed behind Countess Vera and Karlin, he whipped back into the locker room. His dental plates came out and it was the angry, sleepy voice of Wildcat Gordon that Sergeant McClosky and the jailer heard.

They could also hear the sounds of a swift, violent struggle, or they thought they did. In the locker room, The Whisperer made a wry grimace at what he was about to do. This trick took all of the iron nerve the army had built up.

Lifting one of his guns by the muzzle, he rapped himself sharply across his own square jaw, raking the weapon downward. The metal cut his flesh and the blow was hard enough to stagger him a little. No less than this would do.

Sergeant McClosky and the jailer heard the grinding of feet. This was followed by two shots in quick succession from one of their own guns. The outside door banged noisily.

The lights flashed on.

WILDCAT GORDON, his red carnation gone and his clothes rumpled, climbed into the jail corridor. He was employing a wonderful combination of army profanity. Sergeant McClosky's revolver hung in one of his hands; he groped around on the floor until he apparently found the cell keys.

As Sergeant McClosky and the jailer were released, the veteran coppers saw a mean cut and a rising blue bruise on Wildcat's square jaw. Blood oozed and trickled over his collar.

Wildcat's oaths were artistic.

"And he got me as I was coming to me feet!" he grated. "Why didn't you yell sooner? I think maybe I nicked him as he got out the door! So it was The Whisperer? What happened?"

Wildcat received the story of the jailbreak as he stanched the flow of blood from his battered jaw.

"It's tough," he stated. "I'll see that you're protected later, but just now the bloodhounds of the courts are too close on my trail. It might be well to wait a few minutes after I'm gone before you call headquarters. Make your report to Sergeant Thorsen, if you can raise him."

Sergeant McClosky wore a hard grin.

"We'll take the rap for it, Chief," he said, loyally. "We ain't seen hide nor hair of you tonight. All we know is that we were held up by The Whisperer. Damn! That'll be enough to explain, if Henry Bolton starts snooping!"

Wildcat slipped through the door to the quiet street of the precinct in the sticks. It was important that he keep Quick Trigger's taxicab in sight. His own coupé was parked near the jail entrance.

Outside the station, Wildcat stopped for a minute in the shadows of the building. As the police commissioner, he was a marked figure. He was hoping to continue his deception of Countess Vera and her friend, Karlin.

Wildcat inserted the odd dental plates that changed the contour of his good-looking face. His army hat folded into a pocket. His coat was turned

swiftly to gray. Zippers on his yellow shoes took off the colors and left them the same shade as his clothes.

This was accomplished swiftly. He moved toward his dark coupé. Quick Trigger's taxicab was moving slowly about two blocks down the straight street. The Whisperer's ghostly chuckle showed his satisfaction with the plan thus far.

Perhaps The Whisperer was too intent upon watching the red light of the taxicab. Unless Karlin became too suspicious, this might lead to a quick cleanup of the case. Time was highly important, with court deputies lurking about with a bench warrant for his arrest.

The Whisperer slid into the coupé and stepped on the starter. He did not turn on the headlights. In the darkness, he planned to trail Quick Trigger and escape detection.

He did not hear the starting of another muffled motor, because of the whirring of his own engine. Nor had he seen the other car behind him under the trees, or the figure of a man that had moved silently from the door of the precinct station.

This other man was swearing hard oaths, for it was clear the unexpected had happened. He must have come to the precinct station for his own purpose in connection with the two prisoners.

When they had emerged, running toward the taxicab, this man had been just driving up. He had no time to intercept the pair, for he had suddenly seen the gaudy figure of Wildcat Gordon emerge.

He had identified the police commissioner and must have believed he was in pursuit of the prisoners. The man had turned back to his own car when Wildcat had made his lightning change of appearance.

WILDCAT started from the curb in fast second gear. The coupé swung to the middle of the narrow street, running without its headlights. Quick Trigger's taxi was now three blocks in the lead.

The Whisperer did not see the car suddenly speeding behind him, for the other man had the judgment to keep his own lights turned off. His first awareness of the pursuing auto came with surprising suddenness.

The black shadow of the other car shot alongside his coupé. The Whisperer automatically twisted toward the curb where the sidewalk was lined with trees. His instinctive action was too late to miss the grinding together of the fenders and running boards. The other driver emitted a snarling, harsh oath.

The Whisperer's coupé jumped the curbing under the pressure from the side. The Whisperer attempted to prevent a crash and at the same time get one of his silenced guns into his hand.

The hard bulk of a tree foiled his attempt; the coupé smashed its radiator and jerked him forward with such impact that his forehead struck the windshield.

The Whisperer was partly stunned, though only momentarily. This was sufficient for the other driver, who had all the advantage of being still in the clear street. The wrecked fenders untangled and the other man's car shot ahead.

The Whisperer got hold of his senses in less than thirty seconds. He heard the voice of old Sergeant McClosky shouting from the doorway of the precinct station less than a hundred yards behind him.

"Something's happened to the chief! Come on, Joe! Maybe he's collided with The Whisperer!"

The veteran sergeant's feet pounded along the sidewalk, and The Whisperer saw he was waving his revolver. The jailer was following closely. There was no time for a change of appearance, even if he wanted to make it.

The important element of the chase of the taxicab was being destroyed, but The Whisperer could not be overhauled in his present guise, or even as Wildcat Gordon, without revealing all of his careful ruse of escape for the prisoners.

The Whisperer slipped from the wrecked coupé before Sergeant McClosky came too close. He faded rapidly away in the shadows of the trees. Behind him, he heard the exclamations of the bewildered coppers.

"Great glory!" yelled Sergeant McClosky. "He's got the chief! Smashed his car an' maybe grabbed him! Joe, have a look around! I've got to get Sergeant Thorsen at headquarters!"

The Whisperer was swearing softly, making his way afoot out of this street. As always, he had another small car available, but it was several blocks away. In the meantime, all of his trick had been upset, and there was little possibility now of picking up Quick Trigger.

The Whisperer had a quick sensation of fear for the safety of old Quick Trigger. If his loyal companion caught the pursuit of the other lightless car, he would believe it to be The Whisperer following out their plan.

Sergeant McClosky would now call headquarters. Would the veteran copper, in his excitement, be wise enough to refrain from mentioning the visit of the police commissioner?

With Quick Trigger lost to any chance of trailing him, the probability that his own department would be handed quite a lot of misinformation about what had happened, and deputies of the court watching his penthouse apartment for his appearance, he was facing threats of disaster from three sides.

Picking up his nearest car and taking up the hunt for Quick Trigger was his only possible action at this time.

CHAPTER IX
DEAD MEN IDENTIFIED

THE WHISPERER walked into a cigar store not far from where his little car had been parked. Some ten minutes had elapsed since he left the wrecked coupé. By this time, several varieties of trouble might be filling the air around headquarters.

His dental plates came out in the telephone booth and he called headquarters as Wildcat Gordon. The surprised grunt of the operator was not encouraging.

He was connected with Sergeant Thorsen. That man of the wooden face and equally wooden emotions betrayed no excitement, but he talked low, hard and fast for him.

"Deputy Bolton's on his way to the Fiftieth Precinct jail with half a dozen squad cars," he stated. "The Whisperer raided the place and put the boys there out of business. They found a smashed car near the station, but The Whisperer got away."

It was well that the identification of ownership of Wildcat's several small cars would be difficult. He had their licenses registered secretly under various names.

"We've got visitors camping in your office," went on Sergeant Thorsen. "A couple of fine fellows who have been here since this afternoon. I've got them barred from the office, but it wouldn't be exactly a good idea to come walking in."

"Right!" snapped Wildcat. "When I do walk in, they walk out, on their ears! Anything breaking on the Hondos apartment murders?"

"I was coming to that," said Sergeant Thorsen. "The two men killed with John Donaldson are small-time brokers named Sentor and Jones. I've been doing some digging on that myself. Couldn't find any connection that might give a motive for the bump-offs. Both in the clear as straight businessmen."

"Who identified them, Sergeant?"

"Man who gave the name of Kurt, but damned if he didn't fade out before the morgue gave us a buzz! We've been unable to trace him, but we're looking up a few dozen Kurts in the directory. One is a broker himself, but we haven't found his residence number "

WILDCAT was trying to piece together some of the cutouts of this tangled puzzle. The only angle that fitted was that of the dead men's profession. Bond brokers. It was beginning to look as if there might be more than one man behind the counterfeit securities racket that had trapped Countess Vera, the woman of the ivory skin.

"And this fat fellow, Samuel Croy, of the Hondos building, has been around again giving Mayor Van Royston a bad half hour," said Sergeant Thorsen. "Had a man with him named Dollen, and he said this Dollen was visiting one of his tenants and was ready to swear he heard a whispering voice in the Hondos court near the swimming pool about the time of the murders."

"Dead set on having The Whisperer brought in, huh?"

"That's it, Chief. Wants to know why the so-and-so Mayor Van Royston don't take the case into his own hands. The mayor is figuring on doing it, too. He's going to announce in the morning that Henry Bolton is acting commissioner of police, pending the outcome of the jam with the court. Henry's already taken over, or thinks he has."

"So Henry's bossing the works?"

"Yes, Chief, said Sergeant Thorsen, with slow meaning. "But I've got the squads we can depend upon ready for a quick call. Now what do I do?"

"Hold them for that call!" snapped Wildcat. "It's pretty sure somebody's going to be all mussed up, and I've stood about all the mussing I want!"

Wildcat hung up on Sergeant Thorsen's cheerful, "O. K.! The boys'll be waiting!"

The next move was to find Quick Trigger.

WHEN Quick Trigger had opened the taxicab door for Countess Vera and Karlin, he had a driver's cap pulled over his bald spot and his apparently near-sighted eyes peered cautiously at his passengers.

"Fellow who hired me to wait said you'd tell me where to," he mumbled.

The tall, blond Karlin pushed the shaking figure of the woman with the ivory skin into the cab.

"Get going!" he snapped. "Straight ahead and I'll give you the address later!"

As Quick Trigger would have expressed it, this "wasn't doing so good." He closed the taxi door and took the driver's seat. As he rolled away, he heard the sudden echo of shooting in the police station.

"Wildcat's got himself into a jam!" he muttered.

His foot eased up on the gas; he swiftly debated if he should turn back. His instructions had been to get away, whatever happened, and try and play dumb enough to get an address from Karlin without arousing suspicion.

His hesitation at the sound of the shooting was a grave mistake. The man Karlin leaned forward through the window, his hand clamping on Quick Trigger's shoulder.

"Keep going, if you want to stay healthy!" he commanded.

Quick Trigger pressed the accelerator. It was impossible now to waste time to permit Wildcat to pick up the taxicab without arousing more suspicion. Then Quick Trigger suddenly breathed easier.

An unlighted car flashed under a street light two blocks behind him. He could see it in the rearview mirror and his escaping passengers could not. Quick Trigger stepped up the motor. The taxicab rocked under all the speed it would take.

The next streetlight behind showed that the trailing car was coming fast. This was puzzling to Quick Trigger, for Wildcat would not want to overhaul him unless something had happened. The fast lessening of the distance between the cars compelled him to believe Wildcat had been forced to suddenly change his plans. Quick Trigger eased off a bit on his speed.

Karlin's voice had been murmuring as he talked to Countess Vera. Quick Trigger could not see Karlin's hand groping about the interior of the taxi. Karlin apparently did not find anything that would serve his purpose. He bent over swiftly and pulled off one shoe.

The countess was pleading with him in soft tones. He pushed her impatiently to one side. Quick Trigger at this instant saw the pursuing car was only few yards away. One foot slipped to the brake.

The long arm of Karlin whipped through the driver's window. A hard object drove against Quick Trigger's skull as throttling fingers closed on his wrinkled throat. At the same time, one of Karlin's hands caught the steering wheel.

Quick Trigger slumped in the seat, his head rolling to one side. Karlin's hand was holding the wheel; he was pulling himself into the front seat. It is possible he would have succeeded in preventing a crash, only he had failed to see the trailing car that came hurtling upon the slowing taxi.

The man driving the other car may have misjudged his distance because he lacked lights, or he may have given the little matter of accomplishing his purpose more expert thought.

The front bumper hooked the rear of the taxicab. The taxi rubber screamed as it was skidded, and it went over on one side with a splintering of glass.

For the second time, the mysterious driver who had wrecked The Whisperer's car, came through a collision with his own car still intact. He sprang from his seat, ran back toward the taxicab. At this moment, Karlin was pulling Countess Vera through the door on the upper side.

Karlin whirled at the sound of the pounding feet. Countess Vera screamed suddenly in warning, but Karlin turned too late to evade the smashing of a pistol butt behind one ear.

The woman of the ivory skin dropped beside Karlin's limp body, but hard hands closed about her throat; one set of fingers held the sobbing breath in her lungs until a damp cloth cut off her consciousness.

Two minute later, the stranger's car whirled away.

DUE to the desertion of the Fiftieth Precinct street, the wrecked taxicab lay on its side undiscovered for nearly half an hour. Quick Trigger came to groaning consciousness, still trapped under the steering wheel as the first car to arrive braked to a stop.

Seconds later, The Whisperer had pulled Quick Trigger out from underneath the wreck. He had followed the route he had directed be taken until an address had been obtained.

To The Whisperer's questions, when he made sure the older man was not seriously hurt, Quick Trigger could give only an unsatisfactory reply.

He had thought it was The Whisperer's own car following him, then he had suddenly felt as if the world had caved in. Whether the countess and Karlin had escaped alone, or had been taken away in the mystery car was beyond Quick Trigger's memory.

"There's but one answer now," hissed The Whisperer. "The Hondos apartment building. The whole mystery centers somewhere around that place. Anyway, I've got to get Brian Boru out of the rooms there. Quick Trigger, I have a strong hunch this thing has only begun."

"We haven't done so good this far," murmured Quick Trigger reflectively. "I wouldn't want to say positively, but I'm thinking maybe someone behind all this might have caught on as to who D. Smith might be. If somebody knew you were The Whisperer, it could have been a setup for them to put on a little job of impersonation in them murders."

The Whisperer's breath whistled through his odd dental plates.

"I'm pretty dumb, I guess, Quick Trigger! Perhaps you've hit it! Anyway, you're going home, and I'm getting Brian Boru away before anything more happens!"

Quick Trigger protested he was all right, that he would not be left out of this now. He was not to be left out, and The Whisperer emitted his ghostly laugh as he told him why.

"Someday, if we survive, Quick Trigger, we're going to pull a few of these political courts down around their own ears," he said. "In the meantime, a couple of paid rats wearing deputies' badges are camping at our penthouse. It may become annoying to Tiny, so I think you had better be there. There are a couple more of the rats watching my office. Now here's the layout—"

The Whisperer issued a full minute of detailed instructions. Quick Trigger chuckled deep in his throat.

"Looks like they're going to jug you anyway, when they catch you, so I might as well keep you company," the older man grinned.

Whatever The Whisperer's idea, it did not bode well for the paid deputies of a court that had its political reasons for favoring shyster lawyers of the underworld.

LESS than half an hour later, The Whisperer, the unassuming man in gray, D. Smith, ran his coupé into the garage space at the Hondos apartment building. Though it was still early in the night and many apartments blazed with lights, the inconspicuous D. Smith made no secret of his arrival.

Tonight the lights in the playground court, even in the bottom of the murder swimming pool, gave white illumination. Perhaps the tenants had demanded this.

Faces appeared often in many windows. Eyes of both women and men were filled with fear, as they were drawn again and again to look into what had become to them a place of gruesomeness and horror.

Samuel Croy, as owner, could indeed have reason to complain. He would not retain many of his present tenants.

CHAPTER X
THIRD PYRAMID OF DEATH

THE quiet man in gray, D. Smith, ascended in the elevator to his fifth-floor apartment. He had noted that the apartment of Countess Vera was still under guard of his police. His oddly pointed face wore a weird grin as he thought of the improbability of the woman of the ivory skin again occupying that apartment.

He was thinking, too, of the connection of Karlin with the murderers. It would be something of a jolt to discover in the end that his escape trick that had been so neatly trumped had after all only aided in the getaway of the real killer.

Still another thought. The gray eyes of Karlin suggested almost any possibility. Perhaps his association with Countess Vera was only a cover-up for his real activities. Then there had been the blue-jawed man who had stirred both the countess and Karlin down by the swimming pool.

The Whisperer was so immersed with trying to think his way to a solution of the mystery that he was slightly more careless than he should have been. There was no sign of life in his own fifth-floor corridor. The soundproof floors made the Hondos apartment building a place of false tranquility.

Habit only caused The Whisperer to pause before unlocking his own apartment door. Attachés of the Hondos apartment building on the lower floor had given him no attention other than the casual nods of greeting D. Smith had received in his short term of residence.

The Whisperer listened intently. This was his custom when approaching some of his other much-less-luxurious hideouts. At such other places of temporary residence, the Scottish terrier, Brian Boru, would have known he was there, would have been scratching at the door inside.

Then he recalled the door being soundproof and grinned at his own mistake. He unlocked the door and it swung open silently. The Whisperer stepped in, but as quickly attempted to turn and whip out through the door.

The absence now of any welcoming movement from Brian Boru awakened him to a sudden, invisible danger lurking in the room. At least the loyal terrier would have rushed toward him as usual when he entered, if the dog had been there and alive.

In the second or two before a hissing whisper that duplicated his own odd voice penetrated the room, The Whisperer's greatest concern was for the dog's safety. Something had happened to Brian Boru! He might have been killed!

"Put up your hands and stay away from the light switch!" commanded that other whisper. "I can see you plainly, so don't try anything!"

The Whisperer realized his body must be silhouetted against the hallway brightness beyond the still partly opened door. His heel sought the door and kicked it shut at the instant he, too, caught the vague shadow of a man outlined against the drawn window shade.

THE WHISPERER dived with one hand outstretched across the thick rug. One hand was gripping a silenced gun; he instinctively flattened, expecting shots to blaze at his defiant action.

But there was no shooting. Instead, that clear whispering voice said, "You would have it, then!"

The figure outlined by the window had not been alone in the room. All the weight of another man's heavy body landed in the middle of The Whisperer's back, a driving force from hard knees that caused his ribs to bend and crack.

A blow was struck at his head, but he rolled away from it and felt it graze one ear. The Whisperer's free hand whipped up, trapped the back of the other man's neck and pulled downward and over with a spine-cracking pressure.

An oath of pain whistled in his ears as his assailant hurtled from his back. The Whisperer raised his silenced pistol and aimed at where the other figure had been near the window.

There was a sound as if compressed air was escaping. The *thuck, thuck, thuck* of bullets hitting the blank wall could be plainly heard over the sound of the effectively silenced automatic.

For the space of ten seconds, The Whisperer lay motionless.

"You will have it!" grated that other eerie whisper.

Before The Whisperer could turn the automatic toward the elusive voice, it seemed as if a blinding stream of fire slapped into his face and eyes. Ammonia fumes started him gasping and choking.

He whipped to his feet in spite of what had undoubtedly been the discharge of an ammonia gun full in his face, but it was only to feel arms like tentacles of steel encircle his throat.

Once before, The Whisperer knew he had been overpowered by those same arms. He had been sure than they had been the arms of Karlin. He had a vague, fading sense of believing now that Karlin again was his assailant.

But the fading of consciousness was too fast for the identity to matter.

Then a single, blazing light was burning against eyes that had been seared and tortured by the ammonia fumes. The Whisperer had no means of estimating the interval of time during which he had been out. He realized only that now he was not in the apartment he had occupied as D. Smith.

Slowly, his vision cleared enough under the intense ray of the light for him to pick out the details of the strange room. He was sitting with his arms and legs locked by steel hasps in a wooden chair.

He moved; and then he almost cried out. The movement had caused pointed pincers to sink into the flesh of his back.

The grinding pain was proof this great chair had been devised for the possible purpose of extracting information from unwilling persons. Such of the walls of the room as he could see had the appearance of being padded. The light hitting his eyes came from a powerful source in the high ceiling.

This concentration of the light served another purpose. It most thoroughly masked the other men The Whisperer could hear talking in low tones.

He could distinguish three voices, but it was evident these were being muffled to prevent an absolute identification now or later.

THERE WAS suddenly a fourth voice. It, too, was kept low, but The Whisperer stiffened in the chair. There was no mistaking the gritty, cold edge to the tone of Countess Vera's companion, Karlin. Karlin, though as invisible as the others, spoke distinctly enough for his words to carry.

"You think it was his purpose to help us escape, then trap us and murder us as you claim that he did to all the others?"

A muffled reply assured him that this was the truth.

"You think then he would know where the two missing pyramids of gold are hidden?"

That, too, was affirmed by the muffled voice. The Whisperer was convinced now that it had been Karlin who had assailed him in his room. Then he did stand in with these crooks, whoever they might be.

It was regrettable that the thick shadows prevented The Whisperer from seeing that Karlin was standing stiffly with the point of an automatic pushed into his back. Nor could The Whisperer know that the demand to be made by Karlin was uttered under this compulsion.

Each time The Whisperer made the slightest movement, another set of the grinding pincers bit into his flesh. His only way to avoid the pincers was to sit motionless.

"You will tell us what you have done with the two golden pyramids!" came the hard tone of Karlin. "We know they were taken when Sentor and Jones were murdered! Where have you put them?"

The Whisperer had no knowledge of the golden pyramids or their meaning. The only reference to this mysterious element in the false bond case had been heard between Countess Vera and Karlin, when he and Quick Trigger had listened over the disk concealed in their room.

A less astute person than The Whisperer probably would have immediately denied all knowledge of the golden pyramids. But when the game is death, a keen mind holds back what may be a trump card.

The Whisperer replied in his low, husky voice.

"The two golden pyramids are where you will never find them."

"Let him have a taste of the chair!" growled a guttural tone. "Many have had their memory refreshed in that pleasant seat of truth!"

Apparently there were other means of operating the pointed pincers set in the chair than by the prisoner's own movement. The Whisperer strained forward and suppressed a hissing groan.

A score of points were coming together in his flesh. They penetrated only a fraction of an inch under the skin, just enough to tear the ends of raw nerves and set them screaming.

Agony ran like liquid fire to The Whisperer's brain. But his husky voice was defiant.

"You could slice me to bits, but that would not get you the golden pyramids! You cannot go too far, for then you never would find them!"

He was writhing under the pitching torture. One part of his brain commanded him to cry out that he knew nothing of the pyramids, that he could tell nothing. But the cold willpower of the former army officer prevailed.

Karlin did not repeat his demand. The vague light of an opening and closing door flashed and vanished. Another man had silently entered the room. The guttural voice issued a command.

The pincers ceased to punch through The Whisperer's crawling flesh. He could feel tiny rivulets of hot blood running over the skin of his back.

THE newly arrived man in the torture room seemed to be someone with authority. There was a muttered conference, the words of which did not reach The Whisperer's ears. The latest arrival went out. There was a minute or two of talk; then instructions were issued for one man to remain on guard.

"Watch him closely, for even now The Whisperer may be deadly," came muffled words. "Remember, without the lost pyramids we face the disaster of discovery before the fortune could be divided."

The door opened and closed on all but a single man. The Whisperer could hear him moving in the deep shadows. He decided to try an experiment.

"If I told you alone where to find the pyramids, we might get together," he suggested to the unseen guard.

This was only a shot in the dark. The lone man spoke, and instantly The Whisperer was aware there was terror in his voice.

"You know well enough the two pyramids are worthless without the others," the guard stated. "If you value your life, you will reveal where they are hidden. Perhaps—well, then I might act to save you. I do not like to see men die."

The Whisperer read something else in that tone. He believed this man was speaking the truth. He had none of the twist to his speech that denoted the lower order of crooks. His voice, also, lacked the derisive, softer note that betrays refined cruelty.

The Whisperer's keen judgment of the man's character told him the guard must himself be under great fear, and that he was not accustomed to acts of violence.

Before he could take advantage of this keen reading of the other man's personality and speak, there was a shuffling sound near the wall on the side of the room where the guard was standing. There was a single word spoken, a word of two letters:

"So?"

There is perhaps no sound so perfectly designed to chill the human blood as the tearing thrust of a knife through hot flesh, with an accompanying attempt of the victim to force speech through a throat that has suddenly been divided.

This death blow accompanied that one word, "So?"

A body thumped to the floor in the deep shadows. The Whisperer could see the corpse pitch toward the circle under the light, with arms flung out and his gaping mouth suddenly revealed.

The Whisperer strained unconsciously against the steel hasps at his wrists and ankles. The movement forced pincers again into his body, but the murder—almost decapitation—seemed to have numbed his nerves.

He attempted to make out the features of the man who had died in such a ghastly fashion, to penetrate the darkness beyond the body and pick out the killer. But the killer had moved swiftly from the spot.

Apparently the blazing light in the ceiling blinked out. This was not the only darkness that overwhelmed The Whisperer's brain. For a saturated cloth had been clamped over his face. It was left there as the steel hasps of the torture chair were unfastened.

The Whisperer was unconscious of this procedure. He did not know how or when he was removed from the torture chair. He had not known where the room of the torture chair was situated; but during the moments he sat in it, he had the sense of believing he was still somewhere in the mysterious Hondos apartment building.

THE corpse with the horribly divided throat was later to be recognized by attachés of the police morgue as the man named Kurt who had identified Sentor and Jones, then vanished.

The killer in the darkness worked swiftly. He bent over the body of the murdered man, hands groping through the clothing.

His effort was unsuccessful for a minute or more. A harsh oath came from writhing lips.

"Damn him, if he hasn't got it!" he grated.

Suddenly, he gave a mocking laugh. He had removed the shoes of the corpse. His hand probed into one of the long toes. It came out with a gleaming, golden pyramid reflecting the light above.

"The fools!" he said, scornfully. "They will keep their death sentence upon them! None wants to be separated from his pyramid now!"

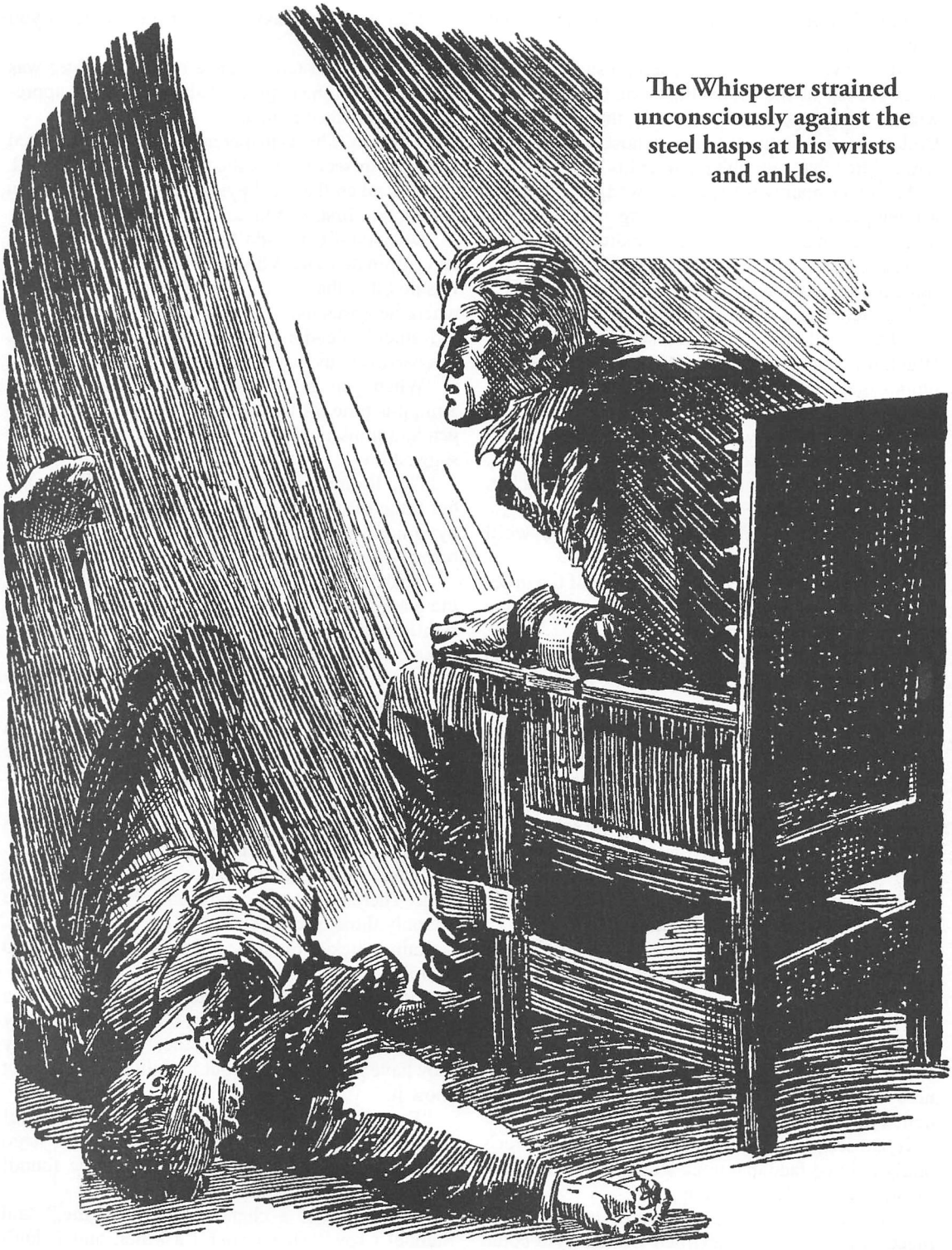
The now-limp body of The Whisperer was removed from the torture chair. He knew nothing of this. If he had been conscious, he would have seen one of the apparently solid walls suddenly split noiselessly open. This revealed a narrow, dark passage that lead downward.

The killer muttered, gloating to himself.

"When the others know, then it will be too late! Then there will be the countess! Too bad such a beautiful woman must be wasted on death!"

Whatever the mysterious murderer meant by this, when he had vanished through the divided wall, the gruesome corpse lay sprawled before the empty torture chair.

Several minutes elapsed before the ordinary entrance door was opened. Three men came in together. One was saying, "There is no other way but to torture the truth from The Whisperer. Perhaps if he sees what pleasant entertainment we can provide for Countess Vera, he will talk to save her."



The Whisperer strained unconsciously against the steel hasps at his wrists and ankles.

CHAPTER XI
ONLY THREE REMAIN

THE voice so cheerfully suggesting some refined torture for the woman of the ivory skin abruptly lost its cruel calmness. The fat Samuel Croy, with his rolling double chin, was the speaker.

He suddenly stood still, his ponderous body a rigid mound of flesh. A hoarse oath choked from his throat.

"Gone! Look! It's Kurt! He got him—but how—how?"

Croy's two companions needed no suggestion to stand staring at the grisly figure of the man Kurt with his red-edged throat. One of these men was Dollen, a quiet-featured fellow, whose hands shook with a force that sent quivers over his whole body.

The other man was the blue-jawed, sleek-haired Rainey. Though Dollen was emitting gasping words that meant nothing, Rainey was standing as if frozen to one spot, his black eyes filled with the glitter of some animal cunning.

The steel hasps of the chair had been unlocked.

"Don't tell me The Whisperer is another Houdini!" snapped Rainey. "No living man could unlock that chair without a key! You have your own keys, both of you?"

Rainey's voice was apparently edged with suspicion as he looked at Samuel Croy and Dollen. Dollen was the first to fumble a key from his pocket. Samuel Croy produced a bit of shining steel.

"And I've got mine!" proved Rainey "Now, we'll see."

His slim hands played over the body of the gruesome corpse of Kurt. They picked up one of the removed shoes and examined it.

"I've thought all the time The Whisperer had some confederates!" grated Rainey. "All the time we thought we had outsmarted him, he was only waiting! So when we went out, someone got Kurt's key to the chair and took his golden pyramid from that space in his shoe! The fool, to think he could hide it there!"

Samuel Croy said, "We are forgetting something. The Whisperer might have taken the keys to the chair from Sentor and Jones. He would know they might mean something, and doubtless he had them on him somewhere we did not search."

"Nuts!" snapped Rainey. "There was no place he could have concealed the pyramid and the keys that we didn't look!"

The Whisperer's clothing and body had been thoroughly gone over in the search for the pyramid when he was captured. It was due to the expertness of old Quick Trigger that the odd dental plates defied detection.

It had seemed so much a part of The Whisperer's oddly pointed face that none would have suspected his jaws were falsely built up.

"But how could The Whisperer have left the place?" muttered the fear-filled Dollen. "He could not have gone out the door, for we would have seen him!"

SAMUEL CROY stepped to one wall. He touched a panel; the door to the secret exit slid silently open.

"That way," he said. "One of the many, as you know."

All of Samuel Croy's once rolling laughter was lost. Now his tone expressed almost as much apprehension as that of Dollen.

"It means The Whisperer has somehow solved more of our secrets than the pyramids," he asserted. "He has taken the third pyramid, and now if we do not get him first, he will kill us all.

"Damned if I shouldn't have informed the police and eliminated The Whisperer when I discovered he was no other than this D. Smith! Now he has us just where he wants us!"

Rainey's slender hands picked at his blue chin. His narrowed eyes were glittering slits.

"When you go off enough to squeal for help, Sam, it is time for Dollen and me to do a little independent thinking," he declared, in an unmistakable suggestion.

"No, Rainey, no!" gasped Dollen. "There are but three of us left! We must stick together! Three pyramids are gone, but there is always the last resort! The dynamite!"

"Yeah," ground out Rainey, "that's right! And there are now only three of us! Yes, perhaps you're right! But there won't be three of us if The Whisperer remains at liberty!"

Samuel Croy was rubbing one pudgy hand over a sweaty, scowling forehead.

"I know you couldn't have meant what you suggested, Rainey," he said, as if seeking to placate the blue-jawed man. "We must stick together, but I have an idea we must go out singly to get The Whisperer. He has seen none of us, and the first man to find him must kill him.

"There is no other answer. The pyramids are gone. There is only the explosion left, but then there are only three of us to share."

Rainey licked his lips, and said, "Three of us to share!"

Samuel Croy then declared that the golden pyramids were a mistake from the beginning. They should have devised some other method. Rainey may have been listening, but his slitted eyes did not show it.

"I've got it, Sam!" he announced. "The dog! If that vicious terrier is given a chance, he'll go straight to where The Whisperer might be found! That's our biggest bet!"

"Not much of a chance in that for me," said Samuel Croy. "That terrier's a killer, and I don't dare go near him!"

Rainey considered this.

"It's lucky, Dollen," he said, "that you've been able to handle him. I've heard some people are like that with dogs."

"Dogs always liked me," said Dollen, "but you

don't mean— You're not putting it up to me to get The Whisperer alone?"

"There are only three of us, Dollen!" snapped Rainey. "Do you want it to be made only two, or only one, or in the end, none of us? You can handle that dog, and we can't! We must not be seen together, so you have no choice!"

The three filed slowly from the torture room, leaving the corpse of Kurt in its own blood on the floor. In another room the black eyes of the Scottish terrier, Brian Boru, gleamed with a killer menace.

AT the approach of Samuel Croy and Rainey, the dog bared his white fangs and snarled, strained at the steel chain attached to his collar. It was only when the mild-appearing Dollen came close that Brian Boru quieted.

Perhaps Brian Boru had the instinct that matched his master's perception. He knew killers when he smelled them. The man Dollen was evidently of a type to fool even the dog.

"That's the only answer," declared Samuel Croy. "Tonight, now, while the streets are deserted, you take the dog with you. Let him have his own choice of where he goes. The Whisperer had some other hideout before he came to the Hondos building. I'll wager the little brute will make straight for it!"

Dollen's face blanched to the color of chalk. It was plainly apparent this was not an assignment he liked. His hand trembled as he thrust one of Croy's automatics inside his coat.

Rainey issued the instructions.

"That dog will make straight for The Whisperer, wherever he is. Keep him on the leash, Dollen, until he tries to enter some building. Free him then, and follow. Conceal yourself when the dog reaches the door he will undoubtedly know. If The Whisperer is there, take no chances!"

Samuel Croy's thick lips smiled a little.

"No chances," he said. "Let him have everything in that rod!"

A few minutes later, the quiet-featured Dollen emerged on a street near the Hondos apartment building. He was not seen by any outsider to leave, for the reason that the exit he had used let him to the street from a building nearly a block from the Hondos apartment building.

The black terrier, Brian Boru, strained eagerly at the steel chain. For a brief time, it seemed the dog had sensed the murder trail on which he had been placed. But Dollen succeeded in quieting him.

Dollen glanced apprehensively up and down the after-midnight street. Only a few cars were moving along the lakefront boulevard. At the first corner, Dollen gave the dog his choice of routes. The man's face was rigidly set. His hand again and again felt the shape of the pistol in a coat pocket.

There was no doubt but that, despite his association, the man was unfamiliar with lethal instruments. His attention was centered upon the terrier. Brian Boru apparently had an instinct that gave him a direction.

A light breeze blew off the lake. Dollen had no means of knowing the terrier was not being directed by memory that would take him to one of The Whisperer's hideouts. Nor that the sniffing of the black, furry nose in that breeze was the reason for the dog's sudden animation, a desire to move faster.

"Easy, boy!" said Dollen, soothingly. "Maybe they're wrong! I guess I even hope they are mistaken! I never killed anyone!"

His reason for stating Samuel Croy and Rainey might be wrong was the fact the dog was determined to follow a dark driveway leading into the deserted lakefront park. It did not seem as if Dollen could possibly reach his goal, The Whisperer, under the trees.

Dollen heard the dog's sudden whimper of eagerness. The terrier pulled on the steel chain. He wanted to be off at greater speed. Dollen breathed with some relief. He thought the dog possibly had scented some animal, perhaps one of the park squirrels.

Dollen's feet shuffled in the gravel driveway. His attention being solely upon the dog, he had no thought to glance behind him. The figure that followed him with silent stealth did not make the mistake of permitting feet to crunch in the gravel.

The figure moved from one tree's shadow to another, crossing the grass of the park lawn, but making surely toward a point where he would intercept the unsuspicious Dollen.

Suddenly, Dollen gripped the dog's steel chain and attempted to halt the terrier's effort to leap ahead. Dollen saw a coupé parked between two trees. He would have missed it had not the dim lights of the instrument board been turned on.

Dollen did not know these lights had come on within the past minute, or that it was a hand reaching in from the outside that had flicked the switch. That hand had been withdrawn and the man who had been trailing Dollen gave a low mutter of satisfaction.

"He'll turn the dog loose and then he'll—" he murmured.

Dollen did not intentionally free the dog. For at the same instant he saw the coupé and the unmistakable profile of a man sitting rigidly upright at the steering wheel, Brian Boru took his freedom in his own manner.

FOR the first time, the terrier resisted Dollen's attempt to quiet him. He whirled, snapped viciously

at Dollen's legs. Dollen dropped the steel chain. He, too, had seen what the dog's keen nose had been following.

It was a scent borne on that light, damp lake breeze—the scent of the silent figure sitting in the coupé.

Dollen was looking at The Whisperer.

The oddly pointed chin, the blur of whitish hair, were unmistakable in the illumination from the instrument board. Free, Brian Boru bounded across the grass toward his master's car.

Dollen gulped an oath and said, "I've got to do it!"

He had no eye then for the shifting of shadows under the trees close to one side. For he raised a shaking hand, steadied the automatic. The distance was about thirty feet.

What was it Samuel Croy had said?

"Let him have everything in that rod!"

The man who had trailed Dollen, crouched, licked his lips and watched. He heard the automatic's safety catch *click.* At that instant Brian Boru bounded into the coupé, springing through the open window to the seat beside the unconscious Whisperer.

There was a silencer on Samuel Croy's pistol. Dollen shuddered as the steel weapon jumped in his hand and gave forth only a series of sounds like the snapping of baby firecrackers. Explosions that would carry sound but a short distance.

The Whisperer was an inanimate target that no man familiar with a pistol could have missed. Slugs *thuck-thucked* into the coupé, whined off the metal with more sound than the powder blasts that sent them.

Dollen was obeying Samuel Croy's suggestion. Though his whole body shivered, he poured every bullet in the automatic into the coupé.

Close behind him, the hidden man moved with pantherish speed. The groan of Dollen over his own first act of killing violence merged into a low moan that followed a crushing blow. The back of Dollen's skull cracked like an eggshell; he pitched to his face in the grass.

The dead man's clothes were swiftly rifled. The killer of Dollen whipped to his feet. He saw that The Whisperer had slipped from view in the seat of the coupé.

"And that finishes the job!" murmured the murderer. "There are now but two pyramids!"

CHAPTER XII
TINY TRAEGER HELPS OUT

"AND that finishes the job! There are now but two pyramids!"

This had been the gloating statement of the killer. Thus he told the purposes that had brought him here: One had been to see that The Whisperer, helpless and unconscious, was murdered. The other was to add one more golden pyramid to his bloody loot.

Whatever magic key the golden pyramids possessed, there now were but two to get to make up the six pyramids of death.

While the automatic had been silenced, perhaps the slayer feared even those cracking shots might have been heard by some wandering patrolman. His feet made no sound as he faded back into the shadows and started toward the boulevard, skirting the park.

Then it was that The Whisperer took a firm hand from Brian Boru's collar. He had been holding the terrier on the floor of the coupé, their bodies protected from the stream of slugs by the steel of the door, if any of Dollen's poorly aimed shots had hit that close.

"Hellamighty, Boru!" exclaimed The Whisperer, huskily. "In the coupé again! This is getting damn thick!"

He wasted only seconds staring out, fixing the location of his car in the park. He was dazed; his head ached; but he was conscious he once more owed his life to the loyal, black terrier.

The Whisperer had been slowly returning to consciousness when the dog's rough tongue had licked at his face. Though not yet aware of his surroundings, the crack of the first shot from Dollen's pistol had sent The Whisperer instinctively off the seat under the protection of the door.

Thus it had seemed to the single living witness that The Whisperer had died as he had desired.

The Whisperer was aware he again was not far from the Hondos apartment building, and that this was the car he had placed in the Hondos garage. No magic of thinking was required to inform him that the torture room in which he had witnessed murder must be somewhere in the apartment building.

BRIAN BORU suddenly jumped from the coupé. The Whisperer made a cautious survey, judged the silenced automatic had created no alarm, and followed the dog. The terrier whined beside the body of a man with the back of his head caved in.

The Whisperer bent over the body. An emptied automatic pistol was still gripped in the dead man's fingers. The fresh smell of powder left no doubt but this was the attacker who had deliberately attempted to wipe him out.

Then who had the murderer been, a killer who had unknowingly become The Whisperer's benefactor?

The dead man's clothing showed every evidence of having been searched. And that indicated, The Whisperer now was sure, that one more golden pyramid had joined the bloody toll of mystery.

At this juncture, a car turned slowly into the park

driveway at the boulevard. From the manner in which it was driven, it was one of the police squad cars.

The Whisperer got back into the coupé and had it moving before the squad car came close enough to have witnessed its departure. He turned off even the instrument board's lights.

The coupé glided almost noiselessly away. The Whisperer heard startled oaths from the other car. Headlights had picked out the figure of the murdered man, for the car stopped. Two patrolmen sprang out.

This was no situation in which The Whisperer cared to be discovered at this moment. His other self, Wildcat Gordon, was up to his ears in trouble now.

The coupé shot away, undetected. The park and the Hondos apartment building were left behind. The Whisperer talked in husky tones to Brian Boru.

"There's one answer, Boru, and only one left! One man alone holds the key to all of this, and I suspect we'll make it most unpleasant for him, if we get the chance! We'll see what Quick Trigger has been doing!"

OLD Quick Trigger followed The Whisperer's instructions to the letter, after he had seen him start for the Hondos apartment building. The former deputy had no means of knowing what might have happened to The Whisperer but that had not stopped him from frequent chuckles over the role to which he had been assigned.

When he arrived at his warehouse, Quick Trigger was walking. The entrance to his penthouse was gained through the lower floor of the warehouse building. A personal passenger elevator was employed to gain the roof.

Quick Trigger was in the door of the lower floor when two bulky figures detached themselves from doorways close by.

"Just a minute, Quick Trigger!" said one of the men. "You know where we can find Wildcat Gordon, so you're going to talk!"

"I couldn't find Wildcat myself this minute," grinned the old man. "And if I could, you could go take a long jump in the lake!"

"Yeah? Well, we're paying you a little visit, and we'll see!" snapped one of the men. "We've been up there, but we know Wildcat ain't come back, so we was waitin' down below! That smart grandchild of yours sent us off on one wild goose chase, and we ain't bein' fooled again!"

"My, my!" clucked Quick Trigger. "Tiny shouldn't have done anything like that! I'll speak to her about it!"

The elevator shot the three men to the penthouse roof. Old Quick Trigger suddenly became affable.

"I told Wildcat there wasn't any use trying to beat the court, that you fellows would keep after him until you got him," he stated. "Come right on in, and I'll have Tiny heat you some coffee."

The growling deputies darted suspicious glances around the corridor of the penthouse. Quick Trigger conducted them directly to Wildcat's rooms. He pointed out that the telephone was right there under their noses, if they happened to want to use it.

Then he suggested guilelessly, "It'd be a heap better to wait up here, because Wildcat would be looking out for anyone down below. So make yourselves at home."

Quick Trigger then shucked off his coat and walked to the door. He apparently made no effort to reach Tiny Traeger, except by shouting for his granddaughter in the presence of the others. When she replied, he asked her to bring along some coffee on a tray.

Tiny's doll-like figure appeared in the kitchen doorway. She glanced past Quick Trigger and identified his guests. A scowl came on her pretty face, and her blue eyes snapped. But she was watching Quick Trigger's hand, which he was holding across his stomach.

Old Quick Trigger's fingers were making queer, twisting gestures. Tiny delayed in the kitchen door to ask, "Cake or pie? Or maybe sandwiches off the roast?"

"Sandwiches," said Quick Trigger, his fingers flying in the figures of the language employed by the deaf-mutes.

He had taught Tiny this language when she was only a child. They often employed this method to talk behind Wildcat Gordon's back for their own amusement.

Quick Trigger closed the door and turned back to the still suspicious deputies. He said he would go in and wash up.

He opened a wide door that led into a square dressing room. The deputies started to their feet and crossed the room. They were too smart to be fooled by any trick telephones or anything like that.

They saw only the square interior of the small dressing room, with a rack of clothes along the rear side. A glance was sufficient to prove the door in which they stood was the only means of entering. It was an inside room without windows. There was a shower bath and washbasin in one corner. There were practically no other furnishings.

Quick Trigger slapped his hands in the basin, rubbing the water over his bald head. He was careful to conceal the blue lump over one of his ears, received in the taxicab.

One of the deputies growled, and they turned back into the larger room. They had seen that the rack of clothes could belong to no other than Wildcat

Gordon. It was a brilliant array of assorted colors.

But as they turned, one of the deputies let out a sudden oath.

"What the hell! I thought there was—"

"Stick 'em up!"

THE voice was the clear, sharp tone of Tiny Traeger. She was standing in Wildcat's door, one of Quick Trigger's big revolvers carefully pointed, though she had to hold it up with both hands.

"And don't think I won't shoot!" her clear, sharp voice added.

"You little devil!" roared one of the deputies. "You wouldn't dare to—"

The bunch of knuckles that rammed the base of his skull were driven with all of Quick Trigger's weight. The ex-deputy might be in his sixties and retired, but it hadn't been so many years since the toughest mugs had carefully lifted their hats when he passed.

The squawling deputy went sprawling forward on his hands. The other deputy was typically the kind of man who would be holding this kind of a ratty job. He managed to dodge his falling partner, pulled a blackjack from one pocket, then whirled upon Quick Trigger.

The weapon swung up and started around in a vicious curve that might have knocked Quick Trigger from his feet. Tiny Traeger screamed and the big revolver in her hand roared in the room with the impact of a small cannon.

The explosion seemed to lift the deputy with the blackjack from his feet. He must have thought he had been hit by a bullet, but he was unharmed. The smart Tiny was aiming the revolver carefully at the ceiling.

The blasting of the gun gave Quick Trigger the opportunity he needed. His bony fist flew out on a straight arm, making solid contact with the second deputy's jaw, just under his ear.

It may not have been ethical, but as the man staggered, Quick Trigger's hard, square toe kicked the wrist above the blackjack.

The deputy howled; his weapon hit the floor. He was tough enough to stay on his feet and, robbed of his handy blackjack, he started a haymaking swing for Quick Trigger's jaw.

The ex-deputy grinned at him and weaved away, his bald head rolling. Knuckles lightly grazed Quick Trigger's skull; then his left fist packed a dynamite punch straight to where the deputy's ribs were joined to his breastbone.

The first deputy to be knocked down was getting slowly to his feet, but Tiny Traeger sprang upon him with all of the fury for which Wildcat Gordon had been named.

The deputy was trying to protect himself from the girl's clawing fingernails when Quick Trigger snapped heavy handcuffs on the other deputy's hands around the steel pipe of a radiator.

"I'll take him, Tiny!" grunted her grandfather. "You do your stuff!"

QUICK TRIGGER'S horny hands ground into the reviving deputy's soft shoulders. The deputy stared at his handcuffed partner who was not only shackled to a radiator, but was limply unconscious.

"She shot him!" he gasped. "It's murder! Let me go, Quick Trigger! I'll get out; I'll keep my mouth shut!"

"Yellow as they make 'em, huh?" grunted Quick Trigger. "Well, you'll stick around!"

The deputy stuck around for the obvious reason he could not pull another iron radiator pipe from the building; too, his own hands were locked like those of his companion. His eyes bugged as he at last turned his gaze on the curly headed, blue-eyed Tiny.

"What in the name of— You're framin' us!" he yelled.

"Being experts at that little game, you ought to know!" drawled Quick Trigger. "Don't make it too strong, Tiny."

Tiny had pulled her black curls into a tangled mass over her ears. One hand tore the thin dress she was wearing partly off her shoulder. She emulated the gritty Wildcat with a sudden clawing scratch across one of her fair cheeks.

"When I wouldn't let them in, both of them grabbed me and forced their way through the door into Wildcat's rooms," said Tiny, with sweet, deadly calmness. "Then they started tearing up this place. It would look better, Grandpa."

Quick Trigger grinned and said, "Well, throw some of Wildcat's clothes on the floor and dump a few dresser drawers around."

Tiny proceeded to do this as Quick Trigger got on the telephone. He talked rapidly in a low tone, for perhaps two minutes; then he raised his voice so his muttering prisoners could hear.

"Yes, sir, Sergeant Thorsen, they broke right in without a warrant an' treated my granddaughter somethin' scandalous when she tried to keep them out of the police commissioner's rooms! They were ransacking the place when I got here, and they hadn't any search warrant that they could produce! You'd better get some men right over!"

WHEN he had listened to all of Quick Trigger's message, Sergeant Thorsen's face wore the closest to a smile that wooden countenance ever exhibited. He was alone at the moment in the police commissioner's office.

The report of the finding of an unidentified

murder victim in what might be a mob ride had taken Deputy Henry Bolton from headquarters.

Deputy Bolton was riding high, having taken over the job of the absent Wildcat Gordon.

Sergeant Thorsen first glanced into the corridor outside the office and made sure two sleepy court deputies were still waiting there on the chance that Wildcat would appear. The sergeant summoned a young detective, Connolly, and issued fast instructions.

A minute later, a squad-car call had been issued and half a dozen detectives filed into the office.

The court deputies, with their warrant for Wildcat Gordon, were aroused by this unusual activity. After the detective squad went in, young Connolly came along the corridor.

"What's up?" inquired one of the deputies. "Something breaking?"

Detective Connolly glanced quickly around; then he spoke in a confidential manner:

"I just heard that two of your buddies are in a jam over at Wildcat Gordon's place. Seems as if Wildcat came back suddenly and they tried to grab him. I don't know what happened, but there has been a call for—"

"Connolly!" rapped the cold voice of Sergeant Thorsen from the doorway of Wildcat's office. "Talking again, huh? You always spill too much for your own good! This will probably cost you a lay-off, unless your friend Bolton can help you out!"

Detective Connolly mumbled something and dropped his chin. He walked slowly away, and Sergeant Thorsen turned back into the office. As the detective squad came filing out to their car, the two court deputies were getting their car underway in fast second gear.

THE deputies' car reached old Quick Trigger's place a short distance ahead of the police squad. Sergeant Thorsen swore and made some protest, but the two deputies insisted on ascending in the elevator with the detectives.

Tiny Traeger was sitting in a chair, with real tears streaming down her face.

"I tried to keep them out of Wildcat's rooms, Grandpa!" she sobbed wildly, as Sergeant Thorsen and the other men were admitted.

"What's all this, Quick Trigger?" demanded Sergeant Thorsen. "How do these men happen to be shackled up?"

"Breakin' and enterin', Sergeant!" stated Quick Trigger. "If I hadn't come in just when I did, they'd have taken the place apart!"

One of the handcuffed deputies howled, "It's a damn frame-up!" Then he saw the other two men from the court. "Don't let 'em get away with it!"

The deputy nearest Sergeant Thorsen caught his arm and snarled out, "So you smart guys thought up something, huh? Well, you'd better call it off before we—"

Sergeant Thorsen's pale eyes became cold like ice. He held the same regard for political deputies performing service for the underworld as did Wildcat Gordon. His movement suggested that the touch of the deputy's hand on his arm was about as pleasant as some kind of vermin.

One of the sergeant's fists snapped up and crossed over. The knuckles thudded into bone and the deputy abruptly dropped his arm.

The other deputy was attempting to pull a gun when a big detective—one of Wildcat's loyal squad men—locked him in a paralyzing grip.

"That puts all of you in the unpleasant position of entering a private place without a warrant," Thorsen stated, calmly. "Also interfering with officers in discharge of their duty. Get them all out of here, boys."

He turned to Quick Trigger.

"You'll be along in the morning to sign complaints, Quick Trigger?"

"I reckon that's my present intention," grinned Quick Trigger. "They're dangerous, Sergeant. One of them tried to blackjack me, and I was forced to defend myself."

The four deputies were mouthing profane threats that fell upon the ears of the detectives with as much effect as gentle rain as they were pushed toward the elevator.

As the cage disappeared, Tiny Traeger, eyed her scratched cheek reflectively in the mirror. Her blue eyes sparkled.

"You're an awful old rascal, Grandpa," she accused, with a smile. "But what have you done with Wildcat?"

CHAPTER XIII
HENRY BOLTON'S MISTAKE

THE jubilation of Tiny Traeger and old Quick Trigger was to be short-lived. If Wildcat Gordon had ever taken the time to give his police department a thorough shaking up, the snooping that brought about an arrest of Quick Trigger might not have existed.

But Wildcat Gordon had shrewdly retained certain members of the department where he said he could keep them under his eye. If several questionable coppers had been ousted, Wildcat would have lost half the zest of being police commissioner.

Perhaps half an hour after the four court deputies had been removed from Quick Trigger's penthouse, a bulky figure stepped from the elevator. The doorbell buzzed and the highly unpleasant, angry face of Deputy Henry Bolton came into the light.

Deputy Bolton seemed to talk sneeringly through his nose, because his mouth was not large enough to accommodate all the venom he put into his voice.

"Dick Traeger," he snapped, "you're under arrest! I'm taking you down to headquarters, and you're going to inform me where to find Wildcat Gordon or face charges of assault and battery, using the police department, of which I am head, as your tool in a conspiracy to defeat the ends of justice, and—"

"Mayhem and arson, Henry," cut in Quick Trigger, with a grin. "I don't mind taking a walk with you, because I don't look in on the boys often enough."

"Funny, eh?" snapped Deputy Bolton. "I've a notion to take that smart granddaughter along to keep you company!"

"Try it, Henry, and I'll smack you right on the end of that long nose of yours!" promised Quick Trigger. "Well, what's holding you back? Let's get going!"

A FEW minutes later, Deputy Bolton conducted his grinning prisoner along the corridor toward Wildcat Gordon's office. Outside the door, he commanded a halt.

"Now you listen, Traeger! Sergeant Thorsen has refused to give me information as to where the four court deputies have been detained! I have it straight that you know! You're going to go in there and come across with the truth, or it's going to be rough on you and a damn sight rougher for Wildcat Gordon! Don't forget, I become commissioner this morning, as soon as Mayor Van Royston arrives!"

Unfortunately for Deputy Bolton, he had his back to the door of the commissioner's office. He did not see that it was pushed partly open. Quick Trigger was looking over his shoulder.

"Yes, Henry," said the old ex-deputy, in a humble tone, "I reckon I'll have to tell the truth."

"Then get in there!" rapped Deputy Bolton. "And when we find Wildcat Gordon, as acting commissioner of police I intend to—"

"Intend to break a leg or something, Henry?"

Deputy Bolton halted, his round mouth screwing into a knot. He saw a pair of brilliant, yellow shoes elevated on a corner of Wildcat Gordon's desk. The commissioner had his army hat pulled over one eye and was fiddling with a bright carnation in his coat lapel.

Police Commissioner "WILDCAT" GORDON

"Where—where'd you come from?" gulped Deputy Bolton; then recovering himself: "Anyway, it makes no difference, Gordon! You're under arrest, until I can obtain the proper court authority! I'm the acting commissioner of police, understand?"

Wildcat's five feet five bounced erect as his yellow shoes hit the floor. A wiry hand closed on one of Deputy Bolton's shoulders, though the commissioner had to reach up to the taller man.

"Get along home to Tiny, Quick Trigger!" barked Wildcat. "So, you're the commissioner, Henry? Before I got on the force I always had a yen to work as police commissioner when the crooks were running the town!"

Deputy Bolton jerked loose from the detaining hand. His eyes fairly popped with rage as he fumed, "It don't go, Gordon! I'm phoning the judge, and you'll be canned until I get the proper authority to send you over to the county!"

Deputy Bolton strode toward the desk telephone. There was but one other occupant of the office. This was Deputy Thorsen, who sat as motionless and unperturbed as an old-fashioned cigar store Indian.

Deputy Bolton did not reach the telephone. Wildcat's hand twisted into his coat collar and yanked him backward.

Deputy Bolton was a big man, but quick on his feet. Underneath his overwhelming personal ambition and jealousy of Wildcat, Bolton had been a fighting copper. His big left fist came up as he swung around, carrying a roundhouse punch.

The knuckles grazed one of Wildcat's ears as he suddenly weaved and let his head roll with the blow. Now, Wildcat looked to be perhaps a third smaller than the big deputy. That did not seem to be much of a handicap as Wildcat's fists exploded quick rights and lefts.

Deputy Bolton landed on his haunches, the back of his head rapping against Sergeant Thorsen's desk.

"Put the bracelets on behind his back, Sergeant!" snapped Wildcat. "Henry, there's only one commissioner of police, and I'm still it!"

Deputy Bolton for the moment was powerless in the hands of Sergeant Thorsen, who betrayed an entire lack of emotion.

"You'll serve time for this, Gordon!" howled Deputy Bolton. "Here you've jammed up the whole department, and we've got two new murders on our hands tonight! The Whisperer has broken one of our jails and continued his campaign of killing! Before you get through, you'll do a stretch for interfering!"

"Sure, sure, Henry," stated Wildcat, with sudden calmness. "The Whisperer slit one man's throat and left him in a ditch, then caved in the head of another man in lakefront park. Instead of getting The Whisperer, you go messing around trying to help out a court that is going to take a whizzer one of these days on some of its own underworld dynamite."

Deputy Bolton was valiantly struggling to prevent apoplexy.

"How'd you know all that? How, I say?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, Henry?" drawled Wildcat. "And before Sergeant Thorsen puts you away for a few hours in the solitary of one of my own office closets, you can be figuring that perhaps I'm licked and trying to get out from under."

WILDCAT calmly returned to his desk, erected his feet and put through a call from a telephone he took from a lower drawer of the desk. Deputy Bolton stared at that telephone. He had not known it was there.

Deputy Bolton was not aware, either, that this instrument did not connect with the headquarters board, but was a private line giving direct service through a PBX board. That private board was located in the penthouse of old Quick Trigger. When occasion arose, it was Tiny Traeger herself who acted as operator.

Deputy Bolton's mouth would then have flopped open if it had not been too small.

"That you, Cal?" said Wildcat into the phone. "Wildcat talking. I've changed my mind about Stack Stevens. Too bad, but I don't seem to have anything on him. It's now nearly two o'clock in the morning. You can release him in the usual way, starting within the next five minutes. O.K., Cal?"

Deputy Bolton did not know the phone call had gone through to a county jail, or that the "Cal" was none other than a sheriff answering to the name of Callahan.

"You can now put Henry away, Sergeant!" ordered Wildcat.

CHAPTER XIV
STACK STEVENS SQUAWKS

WITH Deputy Henry Bolton securely locked in one of his office closets, Wildcat Gordon directed Quick Trigger to go home and stay there.

"You've done a good job, Quick Trigger, and you need sleep."

"Good gosh, Wildcat," protested the former deputy, "ain't we got ourselves into some mess now? How'd you know about them murders, and what would you do if Mayor Van Royston walked in?"

Wildcat's tired, but still good-looking face wore a wide grin.

"Put his honor in the closet with Henry and maybe a new commissioner would come out of it!"

"We ain't doin' so good, Wildcat." Quick Trigger shook his bald head. "This is one time you'll have to have plenty up your sleeve, or we're goin' for a nice, long ride."

"I've got plenty up both sleeves," announced Wildcat. "Sergeant Thorsen, carry on, and if I come back and find you locked up, perhaps I can do something about it. Get along home, Quick Trigger."

"That's O.K. with me, Chief," stated Sergeant Thorsen. "I've been in need of a vacation for some time. Maybe this way I'll get it."

Wildcat Gordon had left his office within five minutes after the forcible detention of Deputy Bolton.

About that same time, a closed car was speeding along a highway several miles outside the city limits. A rugged homely man sat at the wheel and chewed on an unlighted cigar. Beside him, the ratty bail bondsman, Stack Stevens, was handcuffed uncomfortably to the steering post.

"Sheriff Callahan, you're going to hear about this outrage!" snarled the prisoner.

"Kinda think I will," said Sheriff Callahan laconically. "Well, Stevens, we're comin' to the city limits an' beyond that I ain't got any jurisdiction, so I'll turn you loose out here."

"Turn me loose out here? What do you mean?" squawked Stack Stevens. "Why, there ain't even a house in sight, and you don't suppose I can pick up a ride at two o'clock in the morning!"

"I wouldn't, anyway, if I was you," drawled Sheriff Callahan. "Against the State law to hitchhike, an' wouldn't want to have to arrest you all over again, now that you're comin' out of it so nicely."

"Comin' out of it? I'll show you and Wildcat Gordon who's comin' out of it! By this time they've got him locked up for contempt of court, and you won't be far behind him! You take me where I can get a bus or somethin'! Think I'm walkin' after the way I've been treated?"

"I reckon so, unless you got wings," said Sheriff Callahan. "You get out here!"

THE handcuffs clinked and came off. Sheriff Callahan opened the door. He did not speak as his bony elbows suddenly lifted Stack Stevens from the seat and slid him over the running board.

The bail bondsman landed on the concrete and bounced up spilling vituperation.

"Nice to have had you!" came Sheriff Callahan's laconic tone.

The county car turned and left Stack Stevens standing in the middle of the highway. Ahead of him stretched at least a dark mile, without the relief of a single light.

Perhaps the kind of a conscience possessed by the bail bondsman did not add to his comfort. Adding to his discomfiture, a cold rain was beginning to fall. The country night was black, without being relieved by even a few stars.

Stack Stevens clumped down the middle of the road, keeping time to his march with a low type of profanity. His white, skinny face kept turning this way and that. He tried whistling, but that only made his sensations worse.

A little lightning flared in the rain cloud. Stack Stevens wished he could see beyond each bend in the road before he went around it. A lonely night walk in the country was anything but pleasant.

Stack Stevens suddenly stopped and listened. Could that have been a footsteps in the darkness near him? He stared at the place from which the sound had come. It came again, and he wished it had sounded like a footstep.

For it was a sucking, oozy sound, like that which might have been made by a slowly moving auto tire on the wet concrete. Stack Stevens walked ahead hastily. Now there was no doubt about the sound. It was keeping pace with him!

The bail bondsman got out his cigarette lighter, then was too much afraid to flash on its light. He went on, with the skin at the back of his neck crawling. Perhaps he now was seeing the battered, gory head of John Donaldson, the murdered witness, or those other two murdered men taken from the swimming pool at the Hondos building.

Then the lightning flared a little longer and Stack Stevens halted as if rooted to the spot. He would have screamed, but his suddenly dry mouth would not open.

The lightning flare passed, but the bail bondsman knew a silent, grayish figure was standing close to him in the rain. So close he could have reached him in a couple of strides. But the figure had only stood motionless, looking at him with eyes he could not distinguish in the odd features.

A man in gray, with an oddly pointed chin that now seemed to be thrusting through the rain toward him. Stack Stevens at last got out a choking gasp.

"Who are you? What do you want? For Heaven's sake, say something!"

THE gray figure, now wholly invisible in the darkness, uttered no sound, made no movement. Perhaps the ratty bondsman at this moment had visions of some of the victims of mob murders he had helped to beat the rap. Men of the order of Stack Stevens do not like to be alone in the night.

The bondsman started running, his feet beating against the concrete, his breath sobbing from his throat. And the thing close to him again made that sucking sound with its feet, only faster now.

In a lightning flash, the gray figure was still close beside him. And as the rainy darkness closed around him again, Stack Stevens thought at first he was hearing the hissing of drops on the pavement.

The hissing suddenly became words, eerily whispered words that filled the night.

"Stay where you are, Stack Stevens! I have come for you! I am The Whisperer!"

The bondsman did not require information that this was The Whisperer. Sheer terror would have sent him flying from the spot, but steel claws seemed to grip into the muscles of one arm and a cold, round object gently pressed the back of his neck.

"You would be a beautiful mess to be found in the road!" hissed The Whisperer. "You've come to the end of your sweet little game of helping crooks with your filthy bond money, Stack Stevens! Unless you talk fast and straight, you rat, you're going to be just another body in the ditch!"

"What—what is it?" the bondsman got out, almost as hoarsely as The Whisperer himself. "What do you want of me?"

"Answers, Stevens! Not many, but if they're not right, you'll be along to take the consequences! You're taking me to the boss behind the counterfeit bond sales that trapped Countess Vera! I'll ask the questions, and you talk!"

Because his fear of The Whisperer was greater than either loyalty to or fear of another, Stack Stevens mouthed out answers. After which he pleaded desperately, "Let me go! Let me go! If they ever find out, they'll kill me!"

The Whisperer's weird voice assured him, "If they are still alive and able to kill you after tonight, I'll do it myself! Come along, Stevens, we're going, for a little ride!"

WHEN dawn arrived, Stack Stevens sat firmly bound in a chair in a nearly barren room. He had not known during the final moments of the ride what streets had been traveled. The Whisperer had carefully placed him out of commission.

The Whisperer kept the shades of the room drawn closely and there was little light inside. In front of Stack Stevens crouched a black, furry Scottish terrier, of which he could see only eyes that glowed with menace.

"If you speak without being spoken to, Brian Boru will look after you," said The Whisperer's

penetrating voice. "I am going out for a time, but I wouldn't advise inviting the dog's attention with your hands tied like that."

Stack Stevens could see only the vague figure of the gray-clad man. The door was locked as he went out. The bondsman stared with horrible fascination at the terrier. He made a tentative sound with his lips. Brian Boru instantly quivered and a tearing snarl bared his white fangs.

Stack Stevens shuddered and became quiet.

The Whisperer was an inconspicuous figure in gray as he moved through the crowded tenement street. His eyes caught newspaper headlines of the first editions.

Police headquarters was in a turmoil. The city was being combed for Wildcat Gordon. Equaling the furor over reports about Wildcat Gordon was the reported disappearance of Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton, Detective Sergeant Thorsen and four court deputies, reported to have been arrested on framed charges.

Mayor Van Royston had ordered the arrest of old Quick Trigger, and this time the order had stuck. The Whisperer grinned wryly and chuckled in his ghostly fashion.

"Have to let it ride at that," he said. "Sergeant Thorsen was smart enough to get Henry out of the way when he didn't hear from me. If everything doesn't blow up now before tonight."

Newspapers had the further report of the finding of two more murdered men. They had been identified as small brokers, named Kurt and Dollen. Samuel Croy had made the identification of Dollen. The morgue attachés recalled Kurt as the man who had named Sentor and Jones.

THE WHISPERER hurried away through the crowd. He paused at the door of a messenger agency, penned in print two messages, enclosed them in sealed envelopes and gave the addresses. One message was addressed to a brokerage office in the financial district.

The other message went to an apartment in the Hondos building.

The Whisperer emerged, and at the moment he was pondering deeply. The police had been given a report that The Whisperer had also been killed and his body removed by a confederate.

He puzzled some time over that, until he recalled the shots in the park. So they believed him to be dead, did they?

Or was that only for their own purposes?

The Whisperer was no longer guessing at the men behind the golden pyramids. He knew they were Samuel Croy and Rainey. That the four murdered men had been their companions.

Still he was trying to fit Karlin into the picture. There were some things the cringing Stack Stevens had been unable to tell him. Knowing the man's intense fear, The Whisperer believed he did not know what Karlin's real connection might be.

Karlin had been the one in the torture room who had demanded to know where the first two golden pyramids had been hidden. Then he could possibly have been the killer in the park who had struck down the man Dollen.

The Whisperer had intended, after capturing Stack Stevens, bail bondsman, to strike quickly at the men behind the murders. But what he had learned had caused him to delay. Those two messages were important.

For The Whisperer now knew that at least two men were aware of his present identity as D. Smith. There was one other, Karlin, and in some manner that knowledge must be sealed away.

Two men thus had signed their own death sentences by knowledge of who The Whisperer was, but The Whisperer had no intention of becoming their executioner. Both amply deserved death, and would get it anyway in the chair, but there was a more subtle method.

Hence the two messages—messages received as The Whisperer returned to his underworld hideout, and, in the face of the city's furor over the police department upheaval, stretched himself peacefully upon an iron cot.

The blue-jawed Rainey was in his brokerage office when a message was delivered. His office was no doubt conducting a small bond business honestly. But no honest, law-abiding broker would ever have stared at a sheet of paper as did Rainey.

His eyes become only slits of black light. One slender thumb rolled the message into a ball.

This is what he had read:

YOU HAVE BEEN SMART, BUT YOUR OWN DEATH IS PLANNED BY THE ONE WITH WHOM YOU PLOTTED THE MURDERS OF THE GOLDEN PYRAMIDS.

Rainey's lips twisted and formed the two words signed to the message.

"The Whisperer!"

CHAPTER XV
A DEATH TRAP BAITED

SAMUEL CROY'S eyes stared through their rolls of fat at the message he held in his hand. The rolling laughter was absent from his throat, and his thick lips writhed as they repeated, soundlessly, the words on the yellow paper:

YOU HAVE BEEN SMART, BUT YOUR OWN DEATH IS PLANNED BY THE ONE WITH WHOM YOU PLOTTED THE MURDERS OF THE GOLDEN PYRAMIDS.

THE WHISPERER.

Samuel Croy's pudgy hand groped in his clothing. It emerged, bearing three golden pyramids. Three of the objects of inexplicable murder magic. Yet there had been four of his companions murdered.

"He said The Whisperer was dead," he murmured. "Is it some trick, or did The Whisperer escape?"

A sudden, chilling fear shook the huge man's body.

"That could be it," he said, huskily. "The Whisperer was saved, probably to do for me!"

There was cunning now in Samuel Croy's little eyes, like that which nearly always gleamed behind the slitted lids of his lieutenant, Rainey.

"And that would be sweet for him!" he muttered. Then he added, thoughtfully: "And for me! All of it!"

The pretty, blonde Babe, with the polished green eyes, had come into the room.

"What do you mean, Sam, 'for me?'" she said, in a hard voice. "You think I haven't been watching, that I'm dumb? Because her skin is nice and white, and her hair is black and she looks at you like an innocent kid, is that it?"

Samuel Croy's fat face could become as icy as a mask.

"If you want to stay healthy, you'll stop thinking!" he said, tersely. Then apparently he had a sudden idea. "Countess Vera makes you look like some sideshow dancer." He added thoughtfully: "You couldn't blame a man for liking her."

The blonde Babe smiled that smile which had a steel-like edge.

"Yeah? I saw the three golden pyramids in your hand, Sam! You are close to a final cleanup, that's it! I don't know everything, but if you think you're going to leave me out of this on the getaway, you'll have to guess again."

SAMUEL CROY immediately became placating. But he knew he had planted the seed as he had wanted it. Three more persons must die. Samuel Croy let out a counterfeit of his rolling laugh. He looked at Babe's soft, white throat.

Perhaps four persons must die to make everything safe.

If he could only guess straight on what this message from The Whisperer meant. He was thinking, The Whisperer is reputed to be as smart a crook as they produce. We've let him in on something, and he has found out enough to know the tremendous fortune of the golden pyramids.

Could The Whisperer have a plan to finally share in that fortune with some lone survivor?

That could be it. Also, it could mean The Whisperer might figure it would be easier to dispose of one man than two. One way, Samuel Croy guessed this message might be on the square. Again, it might only mean The Whisperer wanted him to survive to get a knife at his throat.

"Then there would be six golden pyramids," murmured Samuel Croy. "And Rainey wants the countess."

"What did you say, Sam?" snapped Babe.

"Only that our good friend Rainey has fallen for the countess," he laughed.

"Yeah?" snapped Babe. "Trying to feed me hooey, now?"

Samuel Croy waved his pudgy hands and said, "Oh, shut up, and you'll come out all right, Babe! The countess will never be anyone's sweetie! She knows too much!"

Babe's polished eyes stared at Samuel Croy.

"Yes, she knows too much!" she whispered.

The conversation had led to the place the fat Samuel Croy wanted it, so he left it there. A minute or two later, he was alone behind the heavy curtain of a dimly lighted room.

Two figures were seated in the room, held stiffly in square, wooden chairs by steel hasps similar to those of the torture chair in which The Whisperer had been held for a while.

The ivory skin of the beautiful Countess Vera was like a floating white mask above a silken black robe. Her parted lips and the luminous eyes added to her attractiveness.

Karlin was in the other chair, facing her, only a few feet away.

"There is no other way, darling," the woman was saying, tensely. "What does it matter? This way, you know there is no hope for either of us. If he will free you, I will keep my word. I will go to him."

Karlin's cold voice grated with the feeling behind it.

"Never! Not that way! I have one hope, Vera, one hope! Something stuck with me last night! I have the feeling The Whisperer will come back! I know now why we were turned loose at the jail!"

Samuel Croy's spine became icy as he listened. He had that same feeling that The Whisperer would come back. At the same time, Karlin was talking right into his hands. A plan had come to Samuel Croy.

He listened a short time to Countess Vera declaring she would sacrifice herself to save Karlin, and his vehement protest. Samuel Croy reached up and pulled a lever in the wall outside the room.

Countess Vera cried out, "Oh, darling, they've come for us!"

The imprisoning chairs were gliding apart. That containing the woman of the ivory skin was pulled silently across the room until it vanished through an opening and closing wall. Karlin cursed in bitter tones, but stopped as Samuel Croy stood before him.

"You would like to go free, perhaps have some fortune, and have Countess Vera for yourself?" Croy said, softly.

"Damn you, all of you!" shouted Karlin. "You speak as if she were some common chattel, another Babe! If I were free one minute, I'd choke you to death on your own words!"

SAMUEL CROY let out his good-humored laugh, with a mocking note. He was thinking; then, this was the plan. It could not be better.

"I admire the Countess Vera very much, Karlin," he said. "I'm not the one you have to fear. You must know who is the boss. Well, he will have her; there is no doubt of that."

Karlin's powerful figure strained in the chair until the steel hasps groaned in their fastenings.

"Karlin," said Samuel Croy, "you did not know that the hasps holding you can be released from an adjoining room. You are going to have your chance for freedom. You have only to pledge you will do as you are told, and the countess will be permitted to go with you."

Karlin demanded suspiciously to know what Samuel Croy might want as the price of this freedom. He must want something badly.

"Yes, that is true," assented Samuel Croy. "Rainey will have the countess or the lives of both of you. Now, suppose I put this little plaything here inside your shirt, where it will be convenient to your hand?"

Samuel Croy produced a long, pointed knife. The blade rasped Karlin's skin as it was dropped into the loose front of his shirt.

"And what am I to do with it?" grated Karlin.

"Rainey, I believe, will be coming here in a short time," said Samuel Croy. "He will come to this room, no doubt. His purpose will be to have Countess Vera's answer, or to kill her. There will be no alternative!"

Karlin took this with his mouth in a hard line. He said he believed that much.

"Then," said Samuel Croy, "your chairs will be close together. It will be so that when Rainey is talking with the countess, his back will be to you. At the proper time, I will be in the adjoining room. When I see everything is right, I will release the steel hasps."

"Yes," said Karlin, slowly, "I can see what you mean. I would kill him anyway, if I had a chance. But then what assurance have you to give that we will go free?"

"I give you my word," said Samuel Croy, softly. "I can't do more than that."

"No, you can't do more than that," said Karlin, thoughtfully. "I will be ready."

The blonde Babe appeared suddenly at the curtains through which Samuel Croy had entered. She darted a quick glance around.

"Rainey is coming up to the apartment, Sam," she announced.

AS a trap of death was being baited, The Whisperer stepped from his small coupé near a building a block from the Hondos apartment building. In the darkness, the slinking, long-haired figure of Stack Stevens appeared beside him.

Brian Boru, the terrier, walked at his master's heels. On Stack Stevens's face was a look of fear. When he spoke, his voice issued through dry, cracked lips.

"We go into this storage building, and there is the passage that goes to the apartment," said the bail bondsman. "You can't, you won't make me go all the way? You have my promise I will see no one, and that I will never again be seen in the city!"

"It is more than a promise!" replied The Whisperer.

CHAPTER XVI
DEATH TRAILS THE WHISPERER

WHEN The Whisperer declared that Stack Stevens's word to leave the city was more than a promise, he was recalling to the bail bondsman that he had been pledged to a swift and merciless death if he were ever seen in the town again after tonight. Stack Stevens licked his dry lips at that.

The Whisperer failed to see the glinting sparkle in the man's eyes. It might have informed him that, even though he was preparing to watch the springing

of a baited death trap, Stack Stevens had the knowledge that made it possible for him to evolve another death plan.

Death for The Whisperer!

The bail bondsman was still the cringing, beaten rat as he preceded The Whisperer into the storage building. This was deserted and had no watchman. Stack Stevens walked close to a wall and his hand touched a projection. The wall opened.

"This passage goes directly into the Croy apartment," said the bondsman. "It is only one of many exits that Samuel Croy had built into his own rooms in the Hondos building. That is why he became the owner of the building."

This informed The Whisperer of more than Stack Stevens could know. It told him how he had twice been spirited from the Hondos building into his coupé, and left unconscious in the lakefront park. It revealed, also, how men had been murdered and brought to the outside without arousing suspicion within the Hondos apartments.

The Whisperer then guessed that the mystery of the six golden pyramids must have something to do with a secret among six men, and that the secret must have its solution within the craftily constructed building owned by Croy.

THEY passed into a musty-smelling underground tunnel. Suddenly this widened into a circular room, the wall of which appeared to have no door. Stack Stevens again manipulated the hidden lever that opened the remainder of the passage.

"Leave me here!" he pleaded. "If anything goes wrong, they will kill me! You have only to go ahead to a stairway! That will take you directly into the big room in Samuel Croy's apartment!"

"If anything goes wrong, you surely will die!" came The Whisperer's husky, low-voiced promise. "Brian Boru, watch him!"

The Scottish terrier immediately flattened, black eyes burning upon the ratty bail bondsman. Stack Stevens shrank against the wall, standing motionless.

"Brian Boru will slit your throat as neatly as could any of your good friends upstairs," reminded The Whisperer. "You'll have to be careful not to make him suspicious of you. And if I fail to return, your chances of getting away from the dog aren't one in a thousand!"

"I'll be waiting," spoke Stack Stevens, in a trembling voice.

The Whisperer glided into the final space of the passage. He used a flashlight and could see stone steps ahead that ascended.

Stack Stevens remained riveted to his spot by the wall, listening intently. He permitted nearly five minutes to pass. Because The Whisperer walked on gripping rubber soles, his footsteps were soundless.

Brian Boru's shoulder muscles quivered and crawled. Not once did he remove his direct gaze from Stack Stevens's face. The bail bondsman had a queer feeling that the dog was selecting a spot on his skinny throat.

Nevertheless, the wall having closed behind The Whisperer at Stack Stevens's touch without arousing the dog's suspicion, the bail bondsman slid one hand cautiously behind him. That hand found a spot he knew to be there.

Stack Stevens drew in a long breath and pressed with his fingers. Brian Boru could see the black space sliding open behind Stack Stevens, but it was beyond his instinct to understand this as long as the man he was watching did not move. There was a gap just big enough for the bail bondsman's body to slip through.

When Stack Stevens moved, it was done so quickly the dog only started a snarling leap. There was a killing menace in that snarl, but Brian Boru fell back, narrowly escaping a trap formed by the swiftly closing edges of the door in the wall.

Stack Stevens's breath was emitted with a great gasp. He started running through another passageway. This, too, led toward the Samuel Croy's apartment. The bail bondsman paused at the top of a stairway where there was an iron door.

The door was soundproof, so he opened it with extreme caution. He glided into a kitchen—the kitchen to one side of the big room with its mahogany table and purple curtain. There was only an ominous silence throughout this section of the luxurious apartment.

The breath of Stack Stevens hissed through his teeth. His upper lip curled, with fear and hate. Very apparently, he knew much of the Samuel Croy establishment. His hand quickly sought a drawer in a side cupboard. It emerged gripping a blue-steel automatic.

The bail bondsman slipped the safety catch and slid along the wall toward the door of the big room with the purple curtain.

NO more than five minutes before The Whisperer and Stack Stevens had entered the concealed passage below the Samuel Croy apartment, the blue-jawed Rainey faced Samuel Croy in the big room.

They looked at each other, with glances steeled to hide their emotions. Rainey was the first to speak.

"We've come to the payoff, Sam," said Rainey, quietly, perhaps too calmly. "I've brought my three pyramids. You have yours. In addition, I have come prepared to take care of Countess Vera."

"Yes, Rainey, things have become too hot for

anything but a quick payoff on the pyramids," stated Samuel Croy. "But Countess Vera cannot be given even the slimmest chance to talk. When you say you will take care of her, do you mean finally, or—"

"Finally!" snapped Rainey's hard voice. "And Karlin! That cleans the slate of what we might have to fear, for The Whisperer is dead! The countess and Karlin must be disposed of in such a way that the bodies will not be found! If that is done, we can continue to move without being suspected!"

Samuel Croy rubbed a tongue along his thick lips and gave a grunt of apparent relief.

"That fixes it fine, Rainey," he agreed. "I was beginning to be afraid the countess had got you thinking of other things. That wouldn't work out."

"It wouldn't work out," agreed Rainey. "So—"

"She's a damn good-looking woman," said Samuel Croy, with something like regret in his voice. "It's too bad—too bad. She is—well, Rainey, it's your job!"

For a few seconds, their eyes fenced silently. No doubt each was thinking, if he only knew of the message from The Whisperer. Or perhaps each suspected the other might have received the same kind of message, but dared not put it to an issue.

"No time must be wasted!" said Samuel Croy.

"None will be!" replied Rainey. "They are together. It will be over with quickly. Where is Babe?"

"I sent Babe out," lied Samuel Croy.

"Come along, then," said Rainey.

Samuel Croy shook his big head slowly.

"I guess maybe that damned woman has got me, too," he stated. "It was agreed she was your job. She and Karlin. I don't like to think of it. I've always been soft about women."

Rainey's wolfish countenance betrayed no surprise. Apparently, he swallowed Samuel Croy's sudden profession of being soft about women.

"O. K., Sam!" he said. "It's unpleasant, but necessary!"

RAINEY had no weapon in his hand as he left the big room, going along the dimly lighted corridor toward the other room of the two chairs with the steel hasps.

Only he did not close the door of the big room behind him; when he was in the corridor, his head was turned just enough to keep that doorway in view.

Rainey kept close to the side of the wall, where his figure was indistinct. An automatic had come into his hand. Halfway to the room where Countess Vera and Karlin were imprisoned in the chairs, Rainey flattened himself against the wall and waited.

"Maybe he'll wait until I do the dirty work," he muttered. "Or perhaps he's figuring on something else. Now would be his best chance, if that's it."

The corridor remained silent, and Rainey was fairly well concealed. But he heard Samuel Croy moving around in the big room he had left. Or he believed it was Samuel Croy.

Scarcely had Rainey departed on his pleasant little mission of death before heavy curtains near the kitchen doorway moved. The pretty, blonde Babe glided close to Samuel Croy.

"Keep moving about," instructed Samuel Croy, in a whisper. "It won't be long!"

It was the green-eyed Babe fussing around in the room that Rainey was hearing as his jaws set. He decided to go ahead and have it over with quickly. Then, the cunning gleam in his slitted eyes boded ill for Samuel Croy.

Leaving Babe in the big room, Samuel Croy chuckled softly in his fat throat as he went into the kitchen. He closed the kitchen door, noiselessly, slid an oiled bolt. Rainey knew nothing of this one secret passage. Not even Babe had ever discovered it.

This was one of the few resources Samuel Croy had kept in reserve for himself. The big electric refrigerator appeared to be immovable. Yet it moved without a sound, revealing a dark space that opened in the wall.

When Samuel Croy entered this space, the refrigerator swung silently back into its accustomed place.

About this time, Rainey had decided to go on into the room with the imprisoning chairs. As he entered, he permitted the automatic to slip back into his coat pocket. He heard Countess Vera stifle a little gasp, a short-bitten oath from Karlin.

Rainey paused, a little smile across his blue jaw.

"I hope you've decided, Countess, and that it's the right way for all of us," he said, quietly, the black glitter of his eyes slitted upon the woman of the ivory skin. "What's it to be?"

Countess Vera's smothered gasp brought another oath from Karlin. But the beautiful woman quickly recovered.

"The answer is yes," she said, quickly, vibrantly. "But I must know that Karlin is safe before I go with you! I must be sure of that!"

"No!" rasped Karlin. "Never that! He can't let me go free, for I'll kill him if he does!"

"Karlin, please!" pleaded Countess Vera. "What does it matter now? I want you to go, to forget!"

"That's the only smart way," stated Rainey, "the only—"

He bit off the word, and his body shifted suddenly to a position in front of the countess. A pointed, keen knife whipped from under his coat. He was looking intently at one of the wall curtains behind this woman of the ivory skin.

Had that curtain moved? Had Samuel Croy tricked him, and was he now lurking there, waiting? Rainey must have reviewed swiftly all of his knowledge of the Samuel Croy apartment, with its many uncanny devices, its secret passages.

NO, Samuel Croy surely had no means of reaching that spot. The curtain hung motionless now. Perhaps Rainey imagined his furtive senses had tricked him. But if Samuel Croy were there, listening—

"It's no good!" rasped Rainey, looking into the widening eyes of the woman that were fixed upon the knife in his hand. "No good, even if I wanted it to be that way! So—"

No intended murderer ever raised a weapon more deliberately, with more cold-blooded indifference to what he was about to do. Even then, he shot a glance over his shoulder at the straining figure of Karlin in his chair. The steel hasps were grinding into Karlin's wrists.

Rainey laughed harshly. His wolfish eyes came back to the woman, who had become like a frozen statue. This was just before a scream was torn from her throat.

Rainey's knife was lifting, when a movement started him turning. Perhaps the opening of the steel hasps on Karlin's chair had grated the slightest bit. Karlin was hampered in his movement by his muscles having been held inactive.

He had a knife in his hand that matched Rainey's. He had the brief advantage of surprise as he leaped upon the man, and Karlin was of tremendous physique.

The bodies of the two men collided; one knife found a mark. Rainey's weapon struck and gritted on bone in one of Karlin's shoulders.

CHAPTER XVII
THE ROOM OF MURDER

AS Countess Vera's shrill scream resounded through the room, The Whisperer's gray-clad figure emerged from a doorway entering the corridor through which Rainey had gone into the room of the chairs.

The Whisperer moved on the woman's scream with catlike suddenness. One of his silenced pistols had whipped into his hand. He was intent upon the still partly open door, through which the terrible cry of fear and warning had come.

And in the big room of the purple curtain, the blonde Babe heard that same chilling scream. A hard, satisfied smile crossed Babe's face and she murmured to herself as she glided toward the open door of the corridor.

From the bosom of her dress, Babe had produced an automatic pistol.

"There'll be no fooling this time, Sam!" was her murmur. "No more double crossing! It'll be you and me, just you and me!"

The Whisperer had almost reached the door in which Rainey and Karlin were locked in what could be only a struggle to the death. The blonde Babe saw the gray, moving blur of his figure, the dim corridor light bringing out his oddly pointed chin and whitish hair.

Even then, the blonde Babe was cool. She glided forward a few steps, apparently to make sure of her aim, raised the automatic.

She did not hear the door of the kitchen open into the big room she had just left, nor did she see the swift spring of Stack Stevens as he crossed the room to the corridor door in two swift strides.

Stack Stevens had not seen Babe. When he was in the corridor doorway, he caught his first glimpse of The Whisperer. The hand of The Whisperer was slowly pushing open the door beyond which sounded the oaths and scuffling of two battling men.

STACK STEVENS ran his tongue over his thin, ratty lips. He raised the automatic pistol he had taken from the kitchen, aiming as steadily as he could. No doubt a gripping fear of The Whisperer served to make him shaky, for he put his arm against the edge of the door.

His fingers closed on the release trigger, and one shot boomed close upon another as he fired. He was looking straight at The Whisperer and was sure he could not miss. Perhaps he was already thinking in his greedy soul of the profit this might bring from Samuel Croy.

The Whisperer dropped flat to the floor. The first rattling of the shots turned and sent him down instinctively. He could see Stack Stevens, so carefully steadying his aim in the doorway with a bright light behind him.

Then The Whisperer heard a woman give a piercing cry of mortal agony. He had never before seen the blonde Babe, and he could not see her clearly now, but he witnessed by some magic of chance the plunging fall of the woman to the floor of the corridor between him and Stack Stevens.

The tricky bail bondsman stood frozen with fear. Too well, he saw what had happened, as the figure of Babe came into the line of his shooting. Still there was the desperate hope that the dropping of The Whisperer meant that at least one bullet had found its mark.

Stack Stevens never heard the hissing like the escape of compressed air that filled the corridor. It is doubtful if there was any pain, more than the shocks of hammering bullets into his body over his heart.

Stack Stevens fell down, blood oozing from his ratty mouth. He had written his last bail bond that

would help to give some killer of the underworld his freedom. He had left the city for good, and for its good.

The Whisperer heard the abrupt cessation of thudding blows inside the room he had been about to enter. He came to his feet, in time to see Karlin and the blue-jawed Rainey stagger apart.

Rainey had no doubt put his own interpretation on the shooting outside. He must have thought then that he had been mistaken about Samuel Croy being concealed on the other side of the room of the chairs. He might even have believed the shots had been intended for him.

"Damn you!" he grated. "I'll finish this!"

The Whisperer saw Karlin's tall figure poised, a long knife in his hand. Scarlet fluid dripped from Karlin's hand. He was swaying a little on his feet, but he lunged upon Rainey.

Rainey sidestepped, evading a knife blow, and whipped a gun from his pocket. The Whisperer had one of his own weapons leveled, when he saw a fat hand come from behind a curtain in back of Rainey.

A pistol spouted fire and Rainey jumped into the air. As he fell, Rainey attempted to twist around, to get his gun in line with the place from which slugs had pounded into his back. But the gun dropped from his hand, and Rainey could only utter a weak, dying curse.

"The Whisperer told the truth!" were the only words he spoke.

The bulky figure of Samuel Croy pushed into view. The man was looking with fear through rolls of fat toward the doorway where The Whisperer still crouched.

He had no means of knowing what the outside shooting had been, but he pointed the automatic at Karlin.

"Can't have any loose talking now, Karlin!" he said, in a tone that sounded like an apology. "I had to do it!"

THOUGH he had a knife in his hand, Karlin was helpless before the pointed weapon. Countess Vera shuddered and closed her eyes. There was no doubt but she would be the next to go.

Samuel Croy's fat hand dropped. A wisp of blue smoke curled with the slow hissing of compressed air from the muzzle of The Whisperer's silenced pistol. Like Rainey, Samuel Croy had but few last words.

"The Whisperer came back—"

Karlin and Countess Vera looked at the man in gray as he stepped into the room. The woman with the ivory skin shivered as the husky, penetrating whisper filled the space.

"Perhaps you are all right, Karlin, and if so, I come as your friend. We have not many minutes, so tell me your story. I will know what is best to be done."

Karlin's gray eyes studied The Whisperer a full half minute.

"You are a strange man, and I'm sorry I did not understand sooner," stated Karlin. "If you are, as you say, our friend, the countess and I are everlastingly in your debt."

"That we shall see," stated The Whisperer. "Now, talk fast, for there is much to be done."

Karlin was talking, with a few quick words from Countess Vera, as The Whisperer shifted from the body of Rainey to that of Samuel Croy. The Whisperer was holding six golden pyramids in his hands.

"So you do not know then the purpose of these?" he stated.

"They are the key to all of it," stated Karlin, "but we do not know."

"The key? Yes, that would be it," said The Whisperer.

He was looking at the fluted, notched edges of the six golden pyramids of death. For each of these bits of yellow metal one man and another had died. But why?

"Oh!" gasped Countess Vera suddenly. "In that door! In that door!"

THE WHISPERER and Karlin whipped around. Pretty, blonde Babe was crawling slowly into the room. She was no longer pretty. Her green eyes had lost their polished, hard luster. They were merely two small, sunken pools of pain under tangled yellow hair.

She fell forward on her face and the dark, red stain along her gown followed the attractive curve of her body close to her heart. But as The Whisperer reached her, she slowly lifted her head and looked at Countess Vera.

"I know all about you," Babe said, faintly. "They tricked you, and you are good. So you win—if I had been good—"

The Whisperer caught her shoulders, pillowing her head.

"You said the countess was tricked but how?" he asked, quickly. "Tell us! These golden pyramids?"

It seemed for a second as if Babe could speak no more. Her eyes faded, then glowed a little as death delayed.

"The room—behind the purple curtain—the purple—"

A slow shudder passed through Babe's slim body. Countess Vera sobbed wildly.

The Whisperer came to his feet.

"Trust me," he said. "You will stay here. It will not be for long, but you must not leave. No matter what

happens, you have never seen The Whisperer!"

"We will wait, and no matter what happens we have never seen The Whisperer," said Karlin, with the solemnity of an oath.

"We have never seen The Whisperer," murmured Countess Vera, "no matter what happens!"

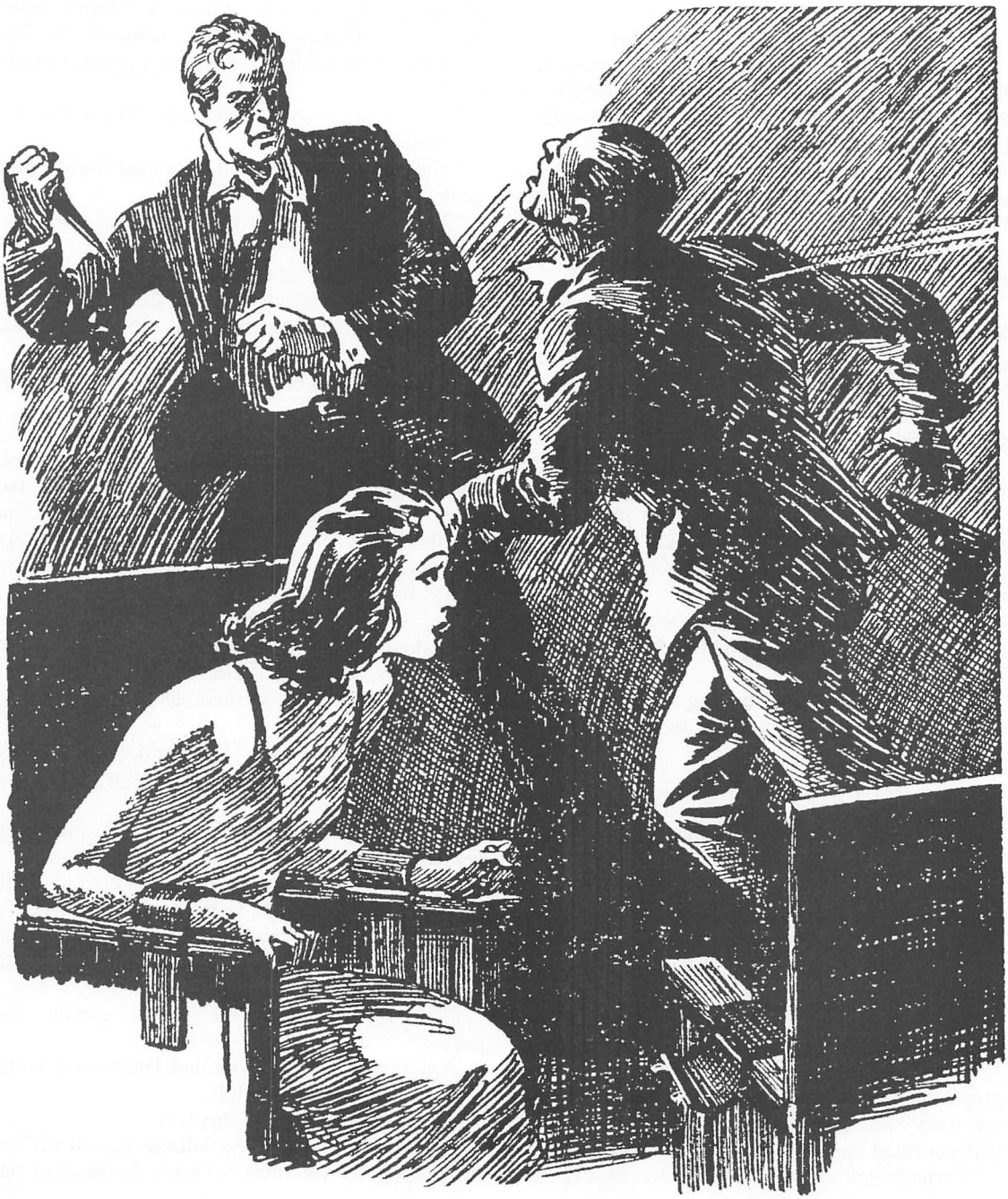
"You must stay with these bodies to make it clear," The Whisperer said quickly, speaking in a low voice to Karlin.

Then he passed into the corridor where Stack Stevens lay dead.

CHAPTER XVIII
BEHIND THAT CURTAIN

TEN minutes after he had entered from the big room of the purple curtain, The Whisperer emerged. There was a telephone on a desk near the mahogany table. For good reasons, The Whisperer did not employ the voice of Wildcat Gordon as he called headquarters.

Replying to the low, husky voice that requested connection with Sergeant Thorsen, the operator



replied, "Sergeant Thorsen is not on duty. I can give you the office of Acting Commissioner Bolton."

The Whisperer emitted an eerie, ghostly chuckle that startled the police operator.

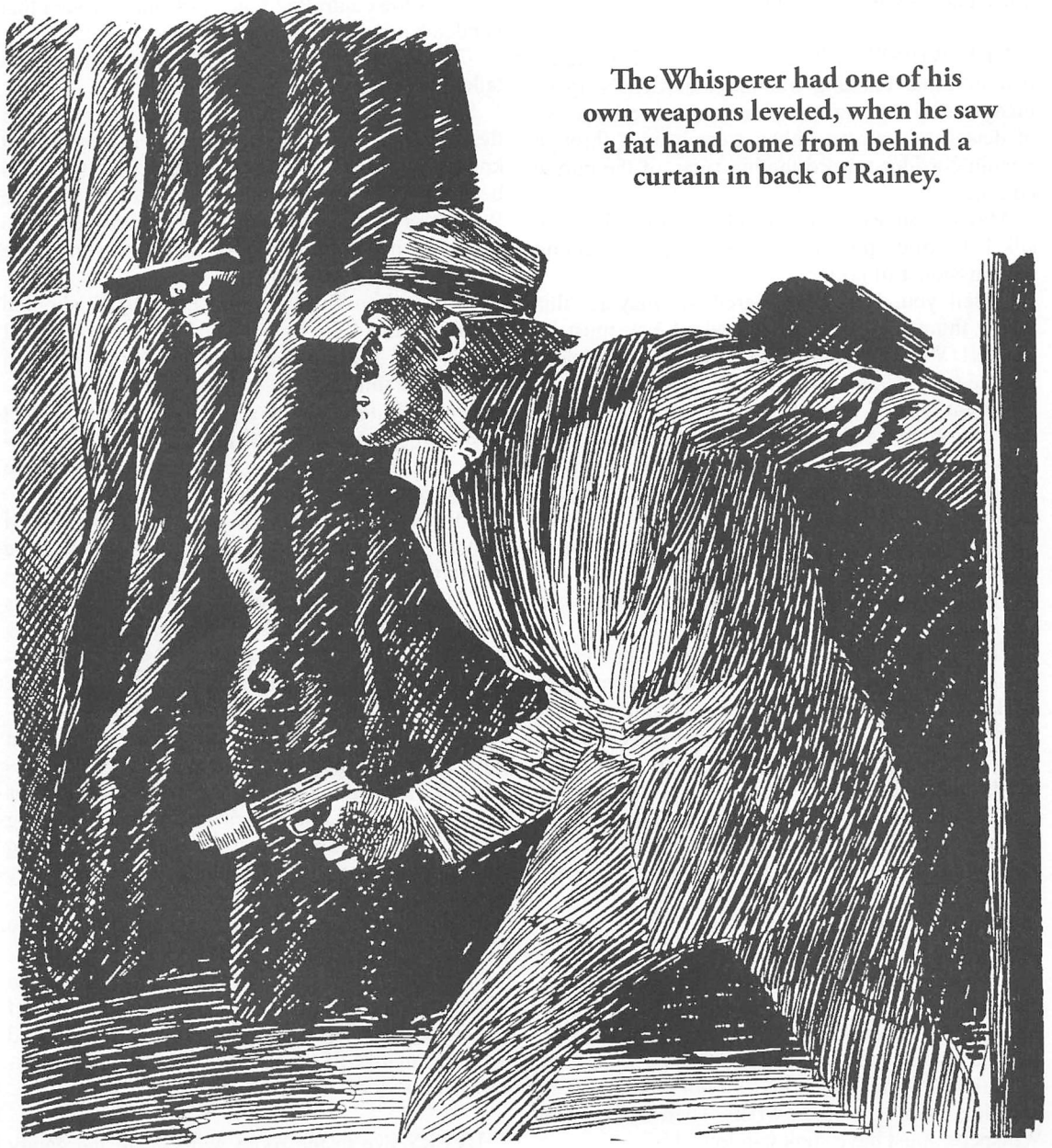
"What's that?" snapped the operator. "Do you want Bolton?"

"I'll have Bolton," said The Whisperer. "No, inform the acting commissioner there have been four murders in Room 415 at the Hondos apartment building. I'm a tenant and I'm not in on this. The doors are open."

The Whisperer chuckled again as he replaced the receiver despite the operator's frantic oath and effort to get more information. He could picture this bit of news striking like a thunderbolt in the office. So Henry Bolton at last was in the chair of the commissioner of police.

That meant Detective Sergeant Thorsen was getting that vacation somewhere in a cell. Quick Trigger would still be held.

The court would still be demanding that the police commissioner produce the body of Stack Stevens, as is the reading of a habeas corpus writ. The Whisperer looked at the doorway leading into the corridor.



The Whisperer had one of his own weapons leveled, when he saw a fat hand come from behind a curtain in back of Rainey.

The court could have the body of the bail bondsman. It was to be regretted, reflected The Whisperer, that the court probably would not

appreciate the irony of gaining possession of Stack Stevens's body.

In the ensuing minute or two, The Whisperer again glided to the doorway of the room where Rainey, Samuel Croy and Babe were only inert figures. Karlin had freed Countess Vera, but they were keeping their word.

The woman of the ivory skin was in Karlin's arms, and they were waiting.

THE WHISPERER had vanished when Henry Bolton came bursting into Samuel Croy's apartment, warily holding a revolver in one hand. A score of detectives and patrolmen were headed through a main corridor toward the big room of the purple curtain.

Mayor Van Royston himself, wearing his tall, silk hat, strode pompously beside his new acting commissioner of police.

"I tell you, Henry," declared the mayor, "this whole thing may be some frameup! You must be careful! We can't afford to start off with more trouble than we already have! We—"

"Great glory!" rapped out a detective. "Look at this! By all the seven devils, it's Stack Stevens!"

When Henry Bolton had got his round mouth untwisted, he said, "You'd know damn well Wildcat Gordon was in this thing somewhere, Mayor! There'll be something more now than contempt of court when we catch up with him!"

The calm voice of Karlin spoke from along a corridor.

"The police? Then you'd better come this way."

Mayor Van Royston walked into the murder room at Henry Bolton's heels. The mayor suddenly felt very sick and went over and sat down in a chair, not even noticing it had strange steel hasps to encircle wrists and ankles.

Henry Bolton stared at Countess Vera and Karlin. His eyes jumped from one bloody body to another. He saw the dried blood where Karlin's sleeve and the flesh under it had been ripped.

Henry Bolton was not a man to take any chances.

"You two?" he yelped. "Put the handcuffs on that pair! So, you've committed some more murders! Mayor Van Royston, he's the man behind all of this, and the woman ain't any better!"

Countess Vera and Karlin said nothing then. The bracelets snapped on their wrists. Their faith in The Whisperer must have sunk to a low ebb.

"Now, what've you got to say for yourselves?" snapped Henry Bolton.

"You'd better talk turkey, for it's going to be used against you!"

Karlin's gray eyes surveyed the hook-nosed Henry Bolton calmly.

"I haven't much to tell just now," he said, slowly. "Only these people killed each other. I heard you say there's another dead man outside."

"You know damned well there's another dead man!" snapped Henry Bolton. "That's what Stack Stevens gets for trying to help out rats like you! Maybe you two would know where The Whisperer enters into this thing?"

It was the controlled voice of Countess Vera that handed Karlin a swift surprise.

"The Whisperer?" she said. "That is the man who talked with the whispering voice!"

She shuddered, but indicated the huge lump of flesh that had been Samuel Croy. And she did not know how close she had come to the truth, for it had been Samuel Croy who had enacted the role of The Whisperer to deceive four of his companions into believing the notorious gray figure of vengeance was striking among them.

"Mayor Van Royston, you hear that?" shouted Henry Bolton. "We've got The Whisperer at last! I told you I'd nail him finally, and I've never let up on the job one minute!"

Henry Bolton ignored several small items of fact in making his claim. But then an acting commissioner must make good, or he may never be more than an acting commissioner.

"A good job, Henry, a good job," murmured Mayor Van Royston, who was still too sick to be himself.

"All right!" rasped Henry Bolton. "I guess this cleans it up, washes it all out! You two precious rats can do some more talking when we've got you separated! I'm holding you for at least the murder of Stack Stevens, and maybe we'll find out a few others!"

Henry Bolton was too engrossed at the moment with his own importance to observe the glances passing between the men of the homicide squad as they went calmly about their business of checking on a few details. The wise detectives were thinking of several items that hardly matched up with Henry Bolton's snap judgment.

"Take them along, boys!" commanded Henry Bolton. "Then, we'll have a look around and—"

"But first, Henry, remove the handcuffs from the prisoners and cool off!" came an incisive voice of command from the doorway. "You've overlooked the little matter of being only the acting commissioner of police!"

EVERY eye in the room whipped to the gaudy figure in the door. Wildcat Gordon had on a new, red necktie and a fresh carnation in his coat lapel. His army hat was pulled over one eye.

"Why, you, Gordon!" yelled Henry Bolton. "You can't step into this! Who do you think you are?"

"Henry," drawled Wildcat Gordon, "you will

have the court informed that your commanding officer is surrendering the body of Stack Stevens, as called for by a habeas corpus writ. In the meantime, it is the bullets in these bodies that will prove who murdered whom.

"I happen to be sure you will not have the gun that killed Stack Stevens, after he had shot the woman there on the floor. Nor will you have the gun that killed Samuel Croy, whom you have just been informed was The Whisperer."

"Mayor Van Royston," shouted Henry Bolton, "I won't stand for this! Boys, put Gordon under arrest!"

Slow grins came over the faces of the detectives.

"How about the warrant, Bolton?" inquired a detective captain. "In the little matter of pinching our own commissioner, I don't think I'd take a chance without one."

Wildcat Gordon wore a hard grin.

"There's one other little thing, Mayor Van Royston," he stated. "Suppose all of you come along. I'll show you a little trick."

The white-faced, snarling Henry Bolton, Mayor Van Royston and the others trailed Wildcat to the big room with the mahogany table. Wildcat pushed aside a heavy purple curtain. All stared at the smooth, square face of a chromium steel door.

Like glittering spots of yellow light, the bases of six golden pyramids protruded from a row of holes along this door. Wildcat moved from one to another of these, turning each. The ponderous door slid back without sound.

The vault back of the door was as large as that in the average city bank. A bright light flashed on. Along shelves were laid many banded packages. Wildcat flipped one of these open.

"We have here," he stated, "United States bonds of indisputable legality and value. I would estimate that a fortune of twelve millions is represented on those shelves. Now back here, we have something, quite different."

Wildcat pointed to several small printing presses. He picked up, one after another, the finest of engraved plates. Then he matched these with a few bonds taken from a stack nearby.

"Never saw anything more perfect," said one of the detectives.

These were the counterfeit bonds that had balked authorities in a dozen countries. So perfect were they, that only lack of proper serial numbers had caused the sales of millions to come to light.

"And these," stated Wildcat, "were the kind of bonds sold by Countess Vera to John Donaldson of Montreal, which cost him his life."

THE detectives, strangely enough, exclaimed with sudden sympathy for the beautiful countess. But Wildcat Gordon only smiled.

"All wasted, boys," he said. "Countess Vera thought the bonds she sold were O.K. I have the record book which shows she paid over her own fortune of a couple hundred thousand in exchange for spurious paper, believing the story one of those dead men told her that she was being given a heavy discount."

"That's it," interposed Karlin. "She is entirely innocent of any intent to violate the law. I didn't kill the man behind this, or the man who tricked her, Rainey, but it was only because I didn't get the chance."

His arms were around the countess and her fingers stroked his unshaved jaw. Both had been watching Wildcat Gordon intently.

"I think I know about The Whisperer," said Countess Vera close to Karlin's ear, "but I don't think I'll ever be sure."

"We'll never be sure!" whispered Karlin. "We must never be!"

Wildcat Gordon waved them away from the vault.

"All six pyramids are required to open that door," he stated. "There is a vast fortune here—a crooked fortune obtained by men who are now dead. I know that Sentor, Kurt, Jones and Dollen were four owners of the pyramids. Samuel Croy and Rainey were the others."

Henry Bolton was screwing up his round mouth and talking into the ear of Mayor Van Royston. Wildcat pivoted.

"Henry, having now gotten The Whisperer, you may get back to headquarters and release Detective Sergeant Thorsen and Quick Trigger!" he snapped. "I'm having some of the other boys bring in the attorneys for Stack Stevens! By the time they get through explaining Stack Stevens's connection with this gang of counterfeiters and murderers, I imagine even a political court will know enough to let go of a hot coal before the judge burns his hands!"

Mayor Van Royston looked very unhappy. Wildcat Gordon had broken another case. You could hardly suspend a commissioner in the face of public opinion, not even if you were a politician.

Wildcat Gordon strode beside Countess Vera and Karlin, as they came from the apartment. From inside his coat came a flat package.

"Courts sometimes are slow, Countess," he said, with a grin. "From among twelve millions, the little matter of your own rightful fortune will hardly be missed, seeing it hasn't been counted. We'll call it a wedding present!"

Then, though headquarters was seething, Wildcat Gordon failed to appear for more than an hour. During that time, The Whisperer found his dog.

THE END

INTERLUDE by Will Murray

The fearsome Whisperer returns in two more high-voltage crime stories torn from the era of the great 20th century Depression.

Our lead story, *The Six Pyramids of Death,* was the third Whisperer novel penned by Laurence Donovan, although it was published fourth in the 1936–37 Street & Smith series. Donovan is still finding his characters, but he seems to have borrowed a leaf from his friend, Walter Gibson, when writing this one. For it's plotted like a classic Shadow novel.

One might well imagine Gibson and Donovan, having drinks at Gately's Bar & Grille across the street from the Street & Smith Building in the Chelsea District of lower Manhattan, brainstorming this story. The terminal climax, with all of its energy and violent and fatal crossfires, is straight out of "Maxwell Grant's" playbook.

Walter Gibson never explicitly mentioned plotting any other S&S hero series, but *The Six Pyramids of Death* is uncannily Gibsonesque.

The localized environment was another Gibson trademark, one that Donovan used many times in The Whisperer. Here, it's a luxury apartment complex in the unnamed city Commissioner Gordon monitored, honeycombed with tricky secret passages—and an even deeper secret all its own. It might have been based upon the Atherstone Apartments in San Francisco, where Donovan lived during his days as a copyreader on the San Francisco *Call-Bulletin.*

Of course, The Whisperer is a twist on The Shadow. Unique in his own right, he smacks of the same mystique. One was a lurker in the shadows, the other a haunter of the fog and mists. Both were classic creatures of the night.

Why did The Whisperer whisper? Probably for the same reason that Doc Savage possessed a signature trilling sound. The Shadow's trademark laugh had captivated radio audiences. In the days before TV, the sound a hero made might make the difference between media success and failure.

A Whisperer radio show did come along much later, but it wasn't the same character.

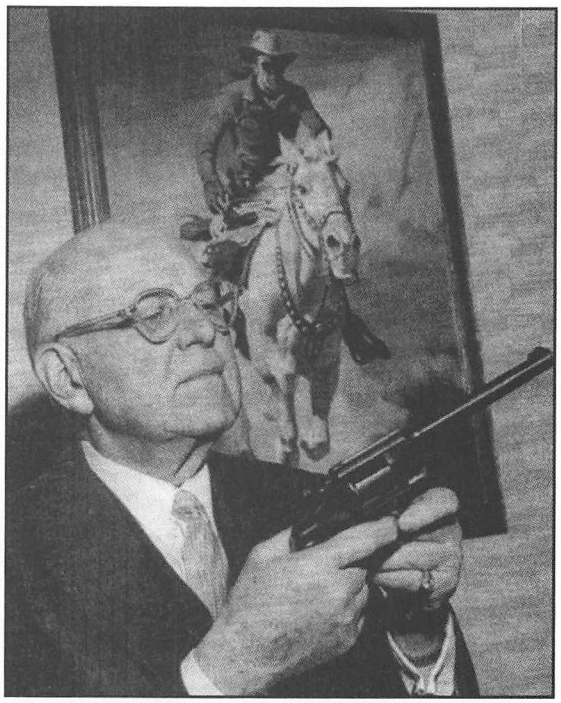
But The Whisperer was more than merely a Street & Smith variation on The Shadow. He had another connection to radio.

In 1936, two new characters debuted. The Whisperer and the Green Hornet. Although very different, they followed the same path.

The Hornet was created by Station WXYZ owner George W. Trendle and his star scripter, Frank Striker. Previously they had pioneered The Lone Ranger. Now Trendle wanted an urban counterpart to his most successful show.

The Whisperer works the same "racket" as the Green Hornet did on radio: He pretended to be a criminal so as to infiltrate underworld dens and dives, the better to crush career crooks. Unwittingly, the police played right along, never suspecting the incredible truth. For the record, *The Green Hornet* debuted in the beginning of 1936 over Detroit's WXYZ, but did not go nationwide until 1938. It's unclear if anyone at Street & Smith heard the program prior to developing The Whisperer. But in those days, many owned radios powerful enough to pick up Detroit stations.

But the parallels are there: A hero who overcomes the red tape of due process by taking the law into his own hands. Newspaper publisher Britt Reid, like Wildcat Gordon, is a crusading public figure. Both lived in downtown apartment buildings and accessed their cars by secret passages—in Gordon's case, via a hidden one-man piston elevator that hissed when in operation. The newspaper headline motif of every Whisperer cover was no doubt calculated to communicate to prospective purchasers that the exploits of its hero were hard-hitting and realistic, since they were torn from the headlines. This smacked of the signature closing of every installment of *The Green Hornet* on radio, where a newsboy called out the day's headline that resulted from the Hornet's latest depredations,



George W. Trendle

ending with the famous cry, "Green Hornet Still at Large!"

Quick Trigger Traeger might have been a variation on Mike Axford, the retired cop who serves as Britt Reid's bodyguard, but is also sworn to nab the crooked Green Hornet. Axford's vow to bring the Green Hornet to justice echoes that of Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton's similar vendetta against The Whisperer.

Although The Whisperer did not drive a supercar like the Black Beauty, night often found him behind the wheel of a nondescript coupé. Sometimes it was gray, other times black. Donovan referred to it as the mysterious car of The Whisperer. Both relied on pistols of their own devising. Like The Whisperer's supersilenced automatics, the Green Hornet's gas gun also hissed when fired. But it released an anesthetizing gas capsule, where The Whisperer dealt exclusively in lethal lead.

But it all goes back to Frank L. Packard's Jimmie Dale, alias the Grey Seal. Prior to the Great Depression, he was a popular dual-identity hero, one who inspired a raft of later pulp heroes, among them The Shadow, The Spider, and of course The Whisperer. The Whisperer's secret apartment in the underworld is right out of the Grey Seal.

In fact, when radio writer Fran Striker was first assigned to launch the crime series that became *The Green Hornet,* George W. Trendle presented him with a copy of a Jimmie Dale novel and asked him to create something like it.

It's entirely possible that Laurence Donovan was given a similar directive when he was first asked to ghost The Whisperer.

But there is one key difference. The Green Hornet and the Grey Seal foreswore killing. The Whisperer did not. There, he harkens back to The Spider. And like The Spider, he had multiple identities.

The Whisperer was also a gray chameleon of a character named "D. Smith."

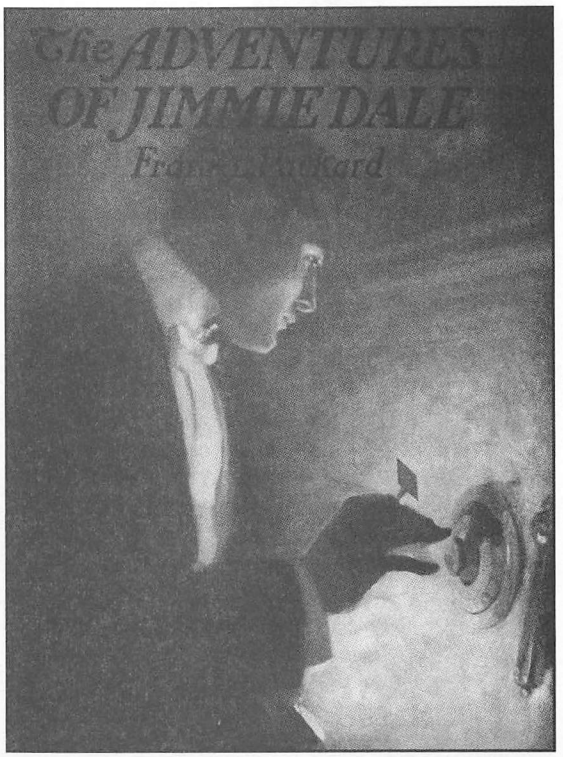
Smith was identical to The Whisperer, except that he seldom wore The Whisperer's strange round-brimmed hat. On a rare occasion, he is called "Dunk." As D. Smith, The Whisperer went undercover, penetrated underworld hangouts and otherwise operated with impunity, inasmuch as no one knew what The Whisperer actually looked like. For the ghostly gray "supercrook" was a being heard rather than seen.

Fans of The Spider will recall that that hero—millionaire criminologist Richard Wentworth—created a similar cover identity as becloaked street violinist Tito Calieppi, which ultimately evolved into the feared public image of the Spider.

D. Smith served much the same function, and throughout the series, when Wildcat Gordon needed a way to infiltrate a situation unsuspected, The

photo courtesy Fran Striker, Jr.

Green Hornet scriptwriter Fran Striker, who also created The Lone Ranger.



***The Adventures of Jimmie Dale* by Frank L. Packard (1917) established the pattern of the hero with a secret identity.**

Frank L. Packard's prototype sleuth was brought to cinematic life in sixteen "two reelers" released in 1916 and 1917 by the Monmouth Film Corporation, with E. K. Lincoln starring in the dual role of Jimmie Dale and the Grey Seal.

Whisperer doffed his signature hat and presented himself as the self-effacing Smith.

A lingering question remains—did Laurence Donovan listen to *The Green Hornet* on radio? We can only guess. But in one Whisperer novel, a character had a Japanese manservant named Koto. And after Donovan left the Whisperer series, he started a new one in Street & Smith's *Crime Busters* featuring a crime fighter known as—The Wasp!

Coincidence? You decide . . . .

To be fair, editor John L. Nanovic's hand cannot be discounted in all this. He was Street & Smith's liaison with radio production companies bringing *The Shadow* and others to the air. Nanovic may well have listened to *The Green Hornet* and similar shows as part of his responsibilities of keeping his finger on the pulse of that then important medium.

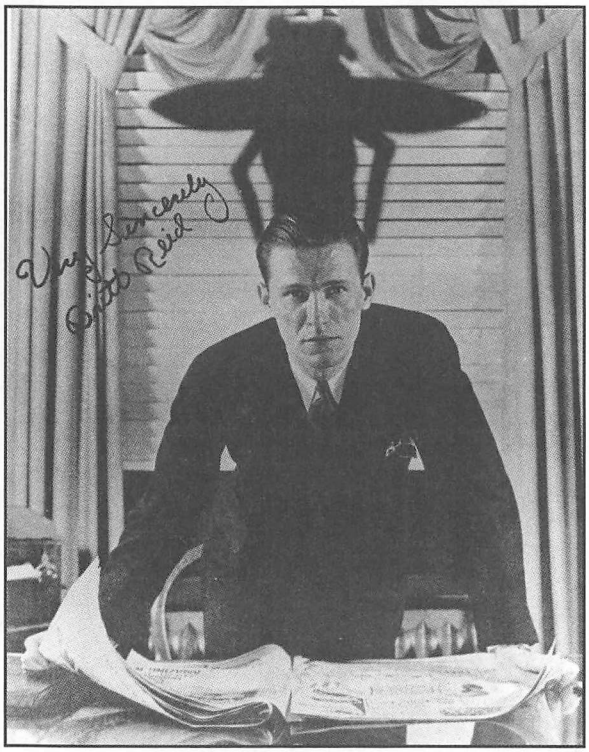
After the events of *The Six Pyramids of Death,* The Whisperer was believed to be dead. Then he came roaring back to life in another mystery that smacks of Walter Gibson at his best. It's a variation on the traditional locked room mystery—except instead of a mere room, the mystery is centered upon an entire country home.

Mansion of the Missing was first published in the February 1937 issue of *The Whisperer.* By this time, Laurence Donovan had written five novels in this hard-hitting crime series. Editor John L. Nanovic reshuffled the order of the earliest stories, running the fourth adventure, *The Football Racketeers,* as the third. But evidently Donovan was forewarned, since *Mansion of the Missing* picks up where *Six Pyramids of Death* left off.

This novel features the semi-recurring Judge Patrick Kyley. The iron-fisted jurist first appeared in the second Whisperer novel, *The Death Roses.* But like all characters in this series, he had no formal introduction. Donovan treated him as if he had always been a staunch ally of Wildcat Gordon. Named no doubt after Donovan's youngest son, Patrick, Judge Kyley was in his way as tough and uncompromising as Commissioner Gordon himself. No doubt it was due to their shared Irish temperament.

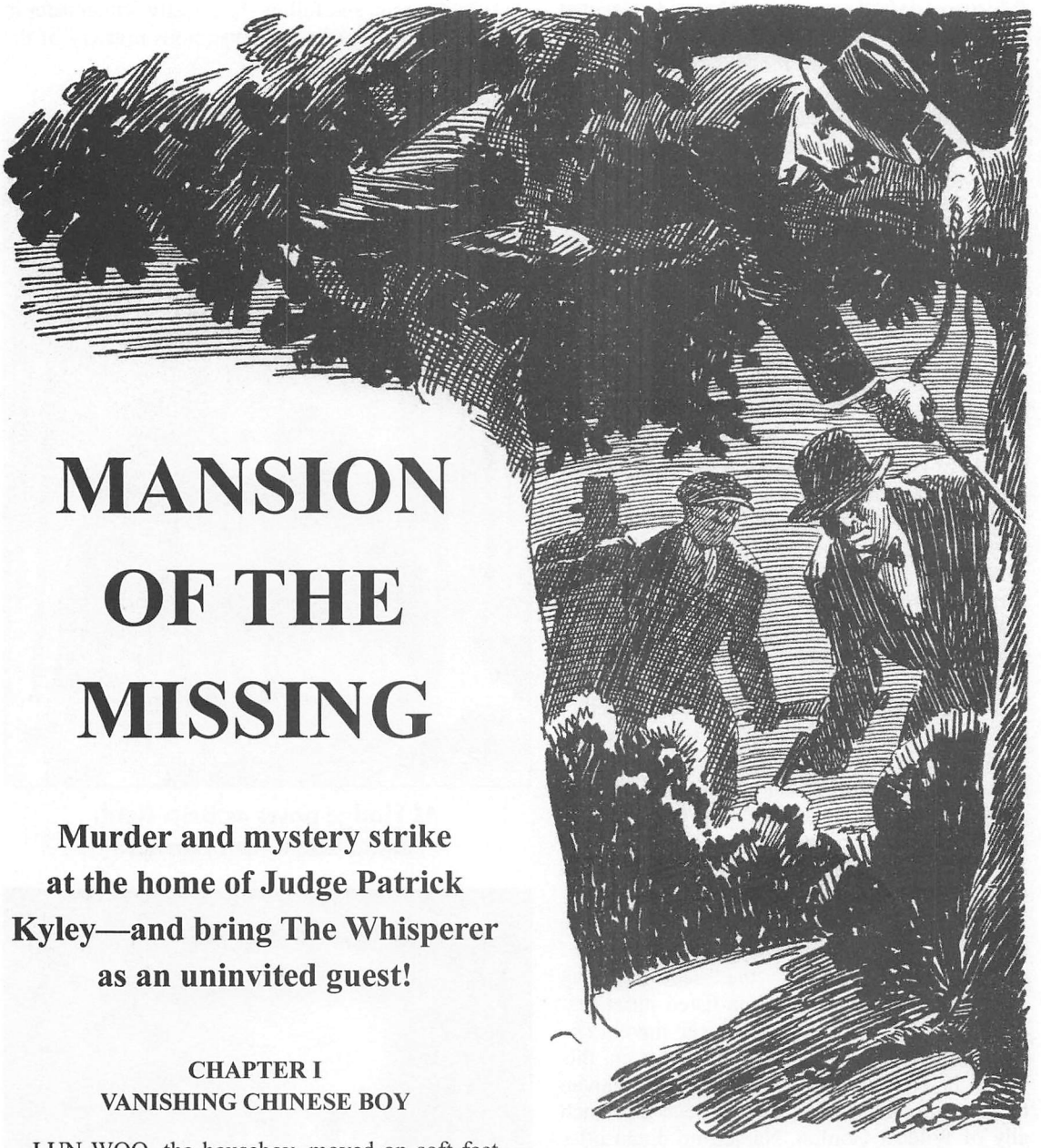
Although Judge Kyley appeared in many Whisperer novels, this was his most prominent turn. Also introduced in this tale is another Wildcat ally, Sheriff "Cal" Callahan of Ponto Hills, the rural county near the unidentified and nameless city in the unknown state where this series is set. He will appear whenever Commissioner Gordon ventures outside his legal jurisdiction and needs the cooperation of local law enforcement. •

Turn the page and follow the ghostly crimebuster in gray as he investigates the mysterious mystery of the *Mansion of the Missing.*



Al Hodge poses as Britt Reid, a.k.a. The Green Hornet.

John L. Nanovic, editor of *The Whisperer*



MANSION OF THE MISSING

Murder and mystery strike at the home of Judge Patrick Kyley—and bring The Whisperer as an uninvited guest!

CHAPTER I
VANISHING CHINESE BOY

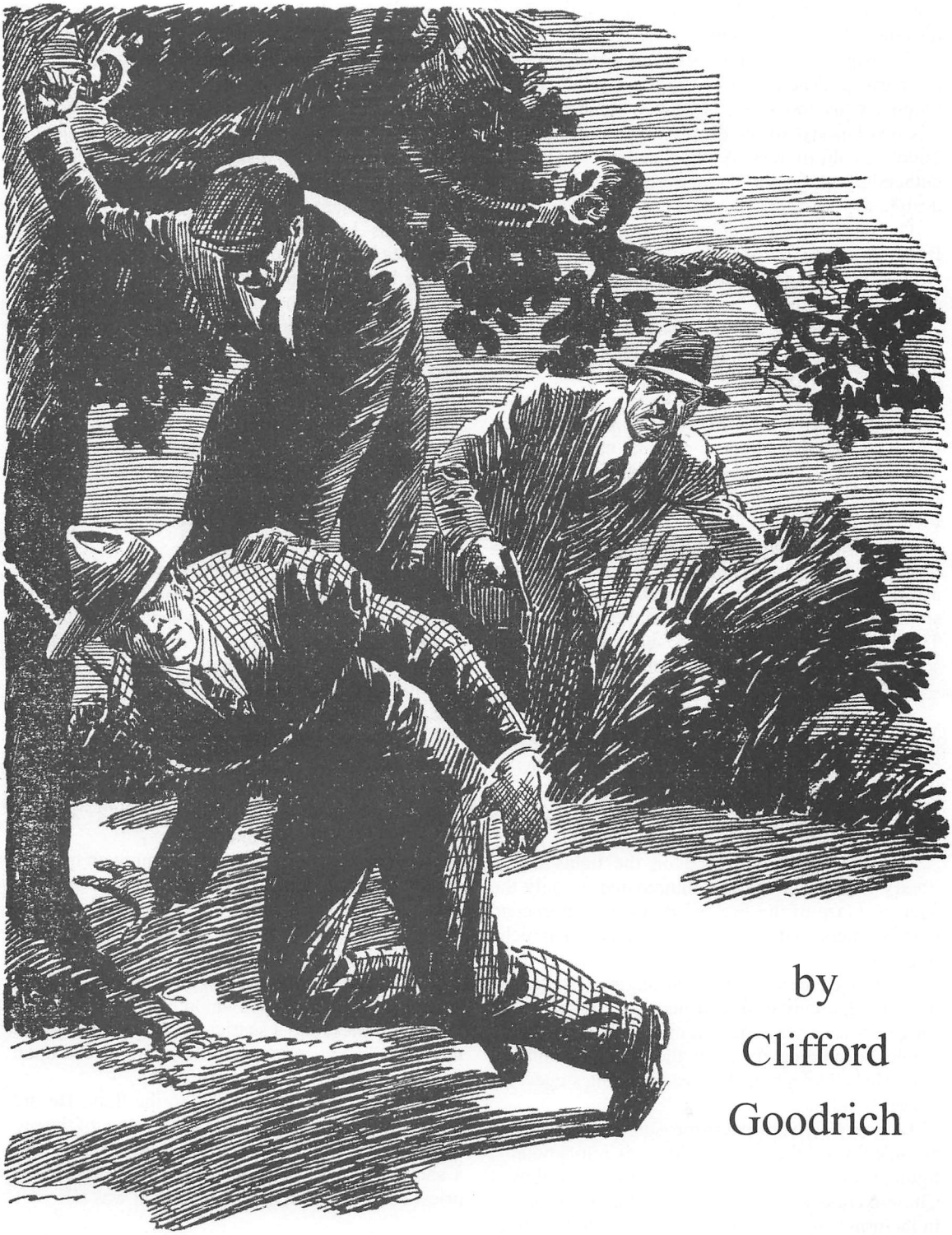
LUN WOO, the houseboy, moved on soft feet, inspired by superstitious fear. His actions would have been peculiar to any Occidental. He avoided the great Oriental rug in the middle of the high-beamed library, walked along the polished strip of floor near the walls.

Lun Woo replenished the cheerful blaze of wood in the wide fireplace, but his bland face was never turned away from the rug. The houseboy then produced two twisted tapers of paper and lighted them, prostrating himself as the tiny flames flared. These were "paper prayers."

As Lun Woo burned the prayers to the gods of his ancestors, the big door of the library opened silently to about six inches or so. Firelight picked out an inscrutable, wrinkled, yellow face. An ancient Chinaman looked in, and the emotion mirrored in his slanted eyes might have been mocking laughter, or it might have been murder.

This second Chinese was Wah Kin, who presided over the kitchen. He was out of his province in the upper hallway, for a lawn party was being given outside the spacious mansion on the hill. Merriment rang out from among the guests of the younger set attending the party. Wah Kin should not have left the kitchen.

Lun Woo, the houseboy, permitted the charred wisps of his paper prayers to drift up the capacious chimney of the fireplace. Again he kept his gaze



by Clifford Goodrich

fixed upon the Oriental rug, as he moved toward a screened window.

Though there was a lawn party in progress, the early autumn night, with its hanging full moon, held a nipping chill. Bonfires blazed on the circular lawn in spots prepared for them, and "weiners" and marshmallows were being toasted.

Lun Woo stood looking at the suspended globe of the Ponto Hills moon, seeing it not as a white lantern that portended a prophecy of good, but as a blood-marked omen of evil. The moon's radiance was crossed by a scarlet shadow, in the eyes of

Lun Woo. He believed his ancestors' spirits were dishonored and displeased.

The paper prayers, the soft-shod feet keeping to the clear, polished strip of the floor, the imagined blood on the moon, the spying of Wah Kin—all this was because of the deeply luxuriant rug in the middle of the library. A rug that had its Oriental authenticity proved in the unevenness of its woven design.

The patterns of the great rug were not matched from one side to the other. The years of patient handwork which had gone into its making had permitted one design to run out and another to begin.

Lun Woo's superstitious fear did not arise from the rug's being truly Oriental and, therefore, worth many thousands of dollars.

For Lun Woo had long regarded this rug as sacred. He was firm in his conviction it had been stolen from Chinese priests of some native temple. The rug itself must have come from a shrine, and it had been defiled by the hands of those who were infidels to the beliefs of Lun Woo's fathers.

Lun Woo's expression never changed, but his lips moved in disapproval at the laughter and shouts ascending from the lawn outside. Surely now the spirits of his ancestors would vent their displeasure. The houseboy was convinced by that imaginary scarlet streak across the full moon.

AS Lun Woo faced toward the library door, it was silently closed. Wah Kin, the cook, mumbled to himelf as he moved away along the upper hallway. He might have been irritated by Lun Woo's actions, or he could have been motivated by superstitious sympathy.

Lun Woo had not turned on the lights in the library. The big room was illuminated by only the dancing blaze of the fire. Shadows were deepened in the corners, and Lun Woo peered into each niche of gloom.

He moved deftly about, arranging articles on the carved, ebony desk that matched the great rug. Judge Patrick Kyley, the new master of the mansion, would be coming up from the station within an hour. He had telephoned he was bringing a guest for a week's holiday.

Judge Kyley, whose stern measures and unbending attitude toward the underworld made him a notable figure, was not accustomed to having a houseboy, a Chinese cook, a great mansion containing a fortune in its furnishings, or any of the other appurtenances of wealth.

His tenancy of the big residence in Ponto Hills had been brought about through the insistence of a friend suddenly called to spend a year in Europe.

Ann Kyley, the judge's motherless daughter, was giving the lawn party for her friends. It was in the nature of a housewarming. None of the young merrymakers could have suspected the touch of Oriental superstition and fear dwelling in the soul of Lun Woo, alone in the library.

There was no intimation of the tragedy about to strike the big mansion in peaceful Ponto Hills, the exclusive residential district for many persons of wealth from the city of steel on the rivers only a few miles distant.

Perhaps Lun Woo, as he moved about, was dreaming of how someday he might win everlasting honor and peace with his ancestral spirits by returning, in some manner or other, the Oriental rug to its priestly sponsors. Again he replenished the wood fire and moved along the edge of the rug toward the ebony desk.

Occasionally, the Chinese boy paused in rapt contemplation of other objects in the library. Vases of a history going back to the Ming dynasty. Canvases worth no less than a fortune. An exotic, almost a weird setting for the hard-headed Judge Patrick Kyley, now in his sixties, and a man who had come up from the bottom.

Lun Woo was so engaged, he neither heard nor suspected another presence in the big room. The firelight created shadows in which vague figures seemed to move. One of these figures suddenly became tangible. It might have entered by the door or from the double windows with their light screens and projecting balconies outside.

Lun Woo was bending over the ebony desk, his fingers touching a small piece of valuable jade. The grotesque, shadowy figure, outlined by the blaze on the wall, was the houseboy's first warning—and his last—that he was not alone.

He started to turn, with a cry forming on his lips. No doubt, his imagination pictured the arrival of an angry ancestral spirit. But a spirit would not have brought a heavy Ming vase crashing down upon Lun Woo's smooth black hair.

The houseboy plunged forward, clawing hands grasping uselessly at the smooth top of the desk. His face struck, and a scarlet stain, much more real than the illusion across the full moon, spread upon the gleaming, black face of the desk.

Lun Woo quivered and slid to the floor. He did not know that his head lay in the thickness of the rug he had so religiously shunned. He might have had a short dream of agony, of some wrathful temple priest come to claim his own, but that was all.

SHORTLY after Lun Woo's superstitious fear had ceased, Ann Kyley left her lawn party guests for a few moments. She had seen Jeffrey, the chauffeur who went with the tenancy of the mansion, drive away in the station wagon. Her father would arrive at the foot of the hills on the night train, and Jeffrey

Lun Woo started to turn, with a cry forming on his lips.

should return within half an hour.

The girl was a bewitching figure, with features of patrician and calm regularity. Her eyes were alive and shining with enjoyment of her housewarming party; but she had not forgotten a guest was to arrive with her father and desired to see that everything had been prepared.

Judge Kyley had asked to have a fire lighted in the library. Ann Kyley went along the silent upper hallway, humming a little tune of happiness to herself.

Until they had been offered this residence in the hills for the year, the girl had never known such luxuries as promised for the coming months in Ponto Hills.

Ann Kyley could still hear the laughing voices of her guests. She pushed open the door of the high-beamed library, smiling as the cheerful blaze in the big fireplace radiated upon her.

The smile became frozen almost instantly. It was a mark of the girl's paternal heritage of courage that she did not scream or utter any sound. Only one hand was pressed suddenly to her lips, and she stood still for half a minute, riveted to her place in the partly open door.

She had expected to see that Lun Woo had put everything in its place for her father's comfort and his guest's convenience. These things were there: The two deep chairs drawn up before the fire, the pipe stands and tobacco jars and a liquor taboret.

But Ann Kyley's eyes widened, and stared. The great Oriental rug had vanished. A heavy Ming vase lay on the bare floor near the ebony desk. Little streaks of dust, which should not have been there, showed how the big rug had been dragged and rolled up.

The judge's daughter got a grip of will on her cold terror. She was looking at a shining, wet spot on the polished, ebony desk. She moved slowly, drawn irresistibly toward it, where a girl of average emotions would have fainted or screamed.

Ann Kyley's fingertips touched the wet spot on the desk, and the girl shivered and hastily used a lacy handkerchief to remove the blood clinging to her hand. She walked slowly around the desk, her eyes darting into every shadow before she switched on the middle lights.

There was no other person in the great room. Lun Woo, the houseboy, had disappeared.

Ann Kyley now saw that more than the rug had been removed. She had familiarized herself with every object in the library. Two of the finest of the Ming vases were missing. One canvas had been taken from a wall, leaving its faint mark.

Not many girls would have noted that the screen windows seemed to have been undisturbed, leaving only the unlocked door as a means of exit. Yet Ann Kyley now recalled she had been up here less than half an hour before, and everything had been as it should be.

Laughter of her guests reminded her that the circular lawn was brilliantly lit, and that the mansion had been completely surrounded by merrymakers every minute of the past two hours.

No person but Jeffrey, the chauffeur, had left the house, and Ann Kyley had stood by the empty station wagon and talked with him just before he had driven away.

AGAIN displaying her calmness, before she alarmed the servants, Ann Kyley went downstairs and quietly summoned half a dozen of the young men attending the party.

When they were at the open door of the library, these young men showed less fortitude than the girl in the face of inexplicable mystery and what seemed without doubt to be the grimmest tragedy.

One of the men was for summoning the county authorities and the State police without delay.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "Ann, this must be a murder—a murder, right in the middle of your housewarming! Only some kind of a gang could have gotten that big rug and the other things out of the house!"

"Yeah!" gulped another young man. "But how, Bill? All of us were down there all the time. We'd better see if there are any guns around. You call the State cops, Bill!"

"No, wait," said Ann Kyley. "Father will be here in a few minutes. He's bringing a guest. I think he would prefer we wait before calling in the police. Call in some of the others, and then we'll see if any of the servants are missing.

They composed a white-faced group of party guests, for one man had darted outside and spread the news. Ann Kyley herself rang for Lun Woo, the houseboy. She was a little sick when he failed to respond, for she had liked the almond-eyed, soft-footed servant.

The middle-aged housekeeper was the next to be called. Ann Kyley had caused her guests to leave the library, and she had carefully locked the heavy door, conducting all to the living room below. In a few minutes all of the servants, seven in number, were facing Ann Kyley and the young men guests.

To the question had anyone seen any stranger, or noticed anything queer happening in the house within the past half hour, the reply was in the negative. The servants, uninformed of what had taken place, were plainly bewildered.

None had seen anything out of the ordinary, they maintained. Then Wah Kin glided into the living room, coming from the kitchen. He had been overlooked when the other servants had been summoned.

The countenance of the aged and wrinkled Wah Kin was like an ugly mask. He betrayed no emotion at being questioned, but he did not reply negatively.

"Lun Woo make the prayer of his honorable ancestors to the rug of the Late Full Moon," he stated solemnly. "I go to see about some wine in the library and I see."

Gasped incredulity came from Ann Kyley's guests.

"Screwy!" muttered one of the young men. "What does he mean 'the rug of the Late Full Moon'?"

"I have it," said another guest. "A Chinese sacred rug, like they had on display at the World's Fair in Chicago. Why, they had temple priests guarding them, and they wouldn't even let a white man put a vacuum cleaner on 'em to get them cleaned!"

"Then what did you see, Wah Kin?" asked Ann Kyley.

"Lun Woo make prayer to his honorable ancestors, that is all," replied the cook imperturbably. "I see there is wine, so then I go away, back to my kitchen."

"It's Lun Woo then, that—that bloodstain," said

Ann Kyley, badly shaken at last.

"He look for his ancestors—" murmured Wah Kin, which was a superstition and of no help.

"I think we ought to call the State cops right away, Ann," insisted one of the young men.

THE other servants were beginning to whisper and babble excitedly. Ann Kyley ordered the housekeeper to get them to their rooms and see that all remained there.

The girl had the key to the library hidden in her dress.

"We will not call the police yet," she announced. "Perhaps we should go on with the party, at least until my father arrives."

But her guests were in no mood to follow this cool advice. Many were for leaving, but Ann Kyley vetoed this. All must remain, she insisted, apologizing for her decision.

"The police will raise the devil and all, Ann, when they find out they weren't called right away," said one man.

"Nevertheless," persisted the girl, "I'm waiting until my father and Police Commissioner Gordon get here."

"Gordon—Wildcat Gordon?" exclaimed the man. "Well, that puts a different slant on your reason for waiting!"

CHAPTER II
WILDCAT SEEKS QUIET

NONE at Ann Kyley's party but had heard of James "Wildcat" Gordon, commissioner of police of the great city below Ponto Hills. In fact, there were none in the state, and but few in many states, who had not been informed of the exploits of the noted reform commissioner.

It was said that there was more dynamite to his inches than could be found anywhere. He was but five feet five inches in height, yet he had been nicknamed "Wildcat" by men of the police department, through which he had fought his way to the top. A former army officer, Wildcat Gordon had within a few months put the fear of his crushing tactics into the underworld.

Likewise, Wildcat Gordon had virtually defied and defeated the attempts of a soft-handed mayor to "oust" him from office for the army methods he had applied in making war on all criminals.

It was for these reasons Wildcat had become one of the closest friends of Judge Patrick Kyley, himself a man who hated crooks even to the point of personal violence on a few notable occasions.

Wildcat Gordon was now riding in the curtained rear seat of the station wagon which had come down from the Ponto Hills mansion to meet the night train. Jeffrey, the chauffeur, a man with tremendous, bulking shoulders and a huge head, was driving.

"You'll have one quiet week at least, Wildcat," said Judge Kyley, as the station wagon turned from a main boulevard into a narrow, curving road leading upward into Ponto Hills.

The judge was gray-haired, slightly round and red-faced, but, like that of Wildcat Gordon, his nonbelligerent appearance was deceptive.

"I could use a quiet week, Patrick," replied Wildcat, easing a finger under a white collar and straightening his black bow necktie.

As commissioner, Wildcat customarily dressed in flamboyant style, topping off clothing of loud colors with a jauntily cocked army hat. But tonight, in deference to the housewarming being given by the judge's daughter, Wildcat was in correct evening attire. He was a handsome figure of a man with clear though nearly colorless eyes and a firm square chin.

"You need a rest!" went on Judge Kyley. "And my bargain mansion with all of its expensive gadgets is just the place for it. If the owner hadn't been a friend, I'd never have gotten it at a price I could afford. I'd be afraid to put a value on some of the art stuff."

"When it comes to art, I'll probably sleep out the week," grinned Wildcat Gordon. "Anyway, I've issued orders that nothing short of the assassination of Mayor Van Royston himself rates calling me."

The station wagon became rattly on the rising grade. The full moon showed only a narrow, winding ribbon of a road. Wildcat sized up the prize fighter proportions of Jeffrey's shoulders.

"Name's Jeffrey," said Judge Kyley, in a low tone. "I've got more servants wished onto me than I know what to do with. The place is isolated, so I took on Jeffrey. He's a strong and able fellow and might come in handy with Ann left alone and all the thousands wrapped up in the art gadgets. Why, in the library there's one rug, that—"

Wildcat did not then hear anymore of the library rug. Jeffrey had slowed the station wagon for one of the trick curves. It was fortunate he had done this, for the light vehicle came around a shoulder of rocks and crashed head-on into an unlighted automobile halted in the middle of the road.

IN spite of Jeffrey's caution, the shock of the collision hurled Wildcat and Judge Kyley from their seat. Wholly unprepared, Wildcat jammed his head and slid to the floor, partly stunned.

Judge Kyley had fortunately put out his hands and was unhurt. Wildcat grunted and was about to pull himself up, rubbing his head; then, he waited. An exclamation ripped from Judge Kyley, and then he was springing into the road.

Wildcat had a glimpse of a tall man walking toward the judge in the moonlight, followed by three others, so he crouched where he was and waited.

The tall man who had come from the unlighted car with three other men was thin-faced, with a diamond ring sparkling on one finger of an uplifted hand.

"Sorry! Sorry!" exclaimed the tall man. "We had ignition trouble and couldn't move the bus. I was going ahead to— Why, it's you, Judge Kyley!"

"Yes, it's me!" snapped the irascible judge. "Anyway, you've got others with you! Why didn't you shove that car to one side? We might have been killed!"

"Sure, I know that," said the tall man, calmly. "But we just stopped. I'll gladly pay any damages, and I hope you're not hurt."

Judge Kyley sputtered in a more modified tone.

"All right, but I—"

"It's kind of lucky at that, Judge," interrupted the tall man. "You see, I've just been up to your million-dollar place to see you. You havin' that kind of a layout sort of gave me the idea you might have begun thinking about your retirement and seen the light on a few things."

"What? What the hell do you mean by that?" snapped Judge Kyley.

"Now, now, Judge, take it easy," said the tall man, quietly. "I guess you wouldn't know who I am. Well, I'm Tony Baggio, see?"

"No! I don't see! Wait! Baggio?"

"Sure, Judge, you've got it," said the tall man, softly. "The only brother to Joe Baggio, you know?"

Judge Kyley shouted suddenly he didn't know, and that he didn't want to know.

"But that million-dollar layout you've taken on," persisted the tall man. "It must be expensive. It's beginning to look kind of bad for Joe, this jewel 'fence' case in your court. Comes to trial next week, I hear. But let's don't talk about that."

Judge Kyley shouted he would not talk about anything. Wildcat Gordon rubbed his knuckles in the darkness of the station wagon. The police commissioner had counted on a few days' rest. Right away here was a jam, with crooks in the making. Wildcat debated his position swiftly.

It might be just as well that the men who had accosted the judge did not know of his presence. Jeffrey, the big chauffeur, was unhurt and was walking from the station wagon toward the Judge and the tall man.

WILDCAT GORDON chuckled and took what appeared to be a set of false teeth from an inside pocket. It was really a pair of oddly constructed dental plates. He slipped them into his mouth.

Only seconds later, he had done various things to his reddish-brown hair, to his tricky evening clothes. It might have appeared that Wildcat Gordon was deliberately avoiding trouble. He slipped from the station wagon on the side opposite the heated altercation.

None would have recognized him as the fighting police commissioner, as he concealed himself quickly by the roadside. He had changed the whole contour of his face with those dental plates. His hair was a blur of gray under a round-topped hat, and his clothes had taken on a drab, gray appearance.

Wildcat Gordon had become the uncanny, mysterious figure most feared by leaders in crookdom of the great city. Terror of the underworld, and hunted by his own police many times for his own violent interpretation of justice.

Not even Judge Patrick Kyley, his friend, knew him as the Whisperer. Certainly the tall man talking to the judge and the others backing up the tall man were not aware of the double identity of The Whisperer and the police commissioner.

The Whisperer gave a ghostly, appreciative chuckle. It was beginning to look as if here would be a spot where his sudden appearance could create consternation. He got out of the car silently.

The Whisperer heard the tall man say: "Let's be reasonable, Judge. Suppose you happened to pick a number on the totals at the Tropical Park races tomorrow? You might be lucky, and such a number pays away up there."

The Whisperer moved silently closer in the bushes. The tall man went on, his tone sneeringly confident:

"You know, Judge Kyley, I wouldn't mind taking your check for a hundred or so, if you don't happen to have the cash."

The Whisperer eased a strange-appearing weapon from a place near his ribs. It was a new type of silenced pistol. But he grinned to himself, and rubbed his knuckles again. This would hardly be a spot for extermination; on the other hand, his knuckles itched.

"Why, you low-lived rat!" shouted Judge Kyley.

The judge was short and pudgy of figure. The attempting briber was tall, towered over him. The judge was forced to jump from his toes. His fist clipped the tall fellow accurately across the chin and staggered him.

"You damn fool!" the man grated. "I thought you had more sense."

"Numbers racket! Brother of Joe Baggio! You filthy vermin!"

Judge Kyley's words and fists exploded together. The tall man lashed back at him, but years before the judge had been a lightweight college champion. His knuckles laced the tall man with righteous fury.

The big Jeffrey stood rooted to the spot for an instant, apparently amazed at the sudden fistic prowess of his rotund, gray-haired boss. Judge Kyley rained expletives and blows, until one of the tall man's companions growled, "How about it, boss? We take him?"

The tall man grunted, "Yeah!"

Three gorilla-like figures sprang toward the battling judge. Big Jeffrey let out a roar of rage and plunged to meet three pairs of fists. Jeffrey knocked one man cleanly into the ditch at one side. The chauffeur swung a haymaker at the second man.

But the third ruffian had slipped behind Judge Kyley. Metal knuckles gleamed and before The Whisperer could glide from the bushes, the judge groaned and pitched forward.

At almost the same instant, big Jeffrey's haymaker went over a man's shoulder and there came the thud like that of a blackjack. It had slipped from one of the man's sleeves. Jeffrey joined Judge Kyley, lying flat in the highway.

The man who had hit the judge with the brass knuckles was deliberately leaning over, doubtlessly planning to put a skull-cracking punch into a second blow. None of the Judge's attackers had known of Wildcat Gordon being in the station wagon. Certainly none had any premonition that the scourge of the underworld was about to strike.

The tall man who had offered the bribe let out, "Good boy, Steve! Give it to the—"

A sibilant eerie whisper, like the sudden blast of a ghostly wind through a graveyard, filled the darkness around the two wrecked cars.

"Stay where you are! If you strike again, you die!"

THOUGH it was a whispering tone, it had a penetrating quality that had been known to chill the marrow in the bones of those who heard it. It had the effect of causing the tall man to stiffen, to dart fearful glances all around.

The tall man saw nothing. The man about to crush Judge Kyley's head with the brass knuckles seemed hypnotized, with his hand still upraised. Perhaps he had a glimpse of the flashing blur of gray that had crossed the roadside ditch. Perhaps he saw nothing.

The Whisperer was swinging a balled fist even as he spoke. It is doubtful if the thug with the brass knuckles had ever been hit so hard. The man's head rocked, and his murderous knuckles tinkled on the concrete road.

There was in the man's eyes much more than the stupefying effect of the blow. His caroming head turned far enough for him to see a wavering face. It had an oddly pointed chin, a long upper lip, a blur of white hair. But the eyes were glowing fire without color.

The thug squawked, "The Whisperer!" as a gray-shod toe booted him on into the ditch.

The fellow who had downed Jeffrey with the blackjack also saw the gray-clad figure, the top of a round-brimmed hat, the white hair. The blackjacker was big and tough, and probably less impressed by fear of The Whisperer than the others.

His blackjack slammed at The Whisperer's skull, but missed. The impact caught The Whisperer on one shoulder and twisted him around. Even as he spun on his heels, apparently teetering backward, The Whisperer's hand came from under his coat.

There was belching fire, but no sound of a shot. It was as if compressed air were being slowly released from a cylinder.

"You asked for it!" spoke the eerie whisper. "Move again and you die!"

The blackjacker's hand jerked loose from his weapon. His hand spread apart, where a bullet had torn through the middle. The Whisperer had fired only once, using that powerful, silenced pistol, with which he could have as easily split the man's heart as his hand.

The next instant, The Whisperer's right foot shot up to the level of the blackjacker's chin. It struck with the force of a mule's kick. The man went to sleep as suddenly as if an anesthetic had been applied. As The Whisperer turned, the tall leader was running, disappearing into the bushes at the side of the road.

Three men of the crooks' car lay unconscious. Big Jeffrey was out, but was groaning and showing signs of reviving. Judge Kyley was still sleeping peacefully.

The Whisperer whipped to the opposite side of the station wagon. His dental plates came out, and then his swift hands worked a transformation with his hair and clothes.

AS Big Jeffrey was helping Judge Kyley to his feet, Wildcat Gordon, impeccable in evening clothes, stepped groggily from the station wagon. He was rubbing his forehead and shaking himself. He peered blandly at the things lying in the ditch, looked back at Judge Kyley getting to his feet.

"That crash put me out like a light," stated Wildcat, calmly. "But you sure worked on these fellows. Sorry I couldn't get into it, Patrick, but you seem to have done remarkably well."

Big Jeffrey stared at Wildcat Gordon. He mumbled, "Good gosh! I went out myself! But as I was coming out of it, I thought I heard a whispering voice! Someone said. 'Stay where you are! If you strike again, you die!'"

Judge Kyley looked blankly at his big chauffeur.

"You're sure, Jeffrey? Wildcat, that couldn't be possible! That sounds like this notorious Whisperer! Why, he wouldn't be up here in the hills!"

"But our experience with The Whisperer has proved he does turn up in the oddest places," said Wildcat quietly. "What was all the row, Judge?"

Judge Kyley told the story briefly, and he said, "That tall rat said he was Joe Baggio's brother! Damned if he didn't make it plain he was trying to bribe this court!"

"Joe Baggio's brother?" said Wildcat Gordon slowly. "That's funny, Patrick. Joe Baggio never had a brother, and your description of this tall fellow fits another man my department has tried to get something on, but failed to do so."

Wildcat Gordon did not explain at the moment that he had not only seen the tall man, but had definitely identified him. He was still chuckling to himself over Judge Kyley's bewilderment at the reported appearance of The Whisperer.

It happened that Judge Kyley was one of the few who rather hoped The Whisperer would never be caught, but would continue to inflict his strangely violent justice upon denizens of the underworld. But the judge was of the stern character that would have sentenced The Whisperer for an infraction of the law as quickly as he would any other man.

Wildcat certainly never wanted his friend, Judge Kyley, to know the truth of his dual identity.

Judge Kyley was looking at the senseless thugs.

"We ought to finish them off!" he raged. "They got Jeffrey, as big as he is! I never imagined I'd ever owe a debt to this Whisperer!"

"Yes, we ought to finish the rats off," stated Wildcat. "The fellow who said he was Joe Baggio's brother has beat it. If that station wagon will percolate, suppose we get along? You promised me a quiet week in the country, Patrick."

Big Jeffrey found the station wagon's radiator had been smashed. The chauffeur said, apologetically, "I should 'a' slammed them guys sooner, Judge. I think I'll take out a gun permit after this."

"We'll keep off gunplay, Jeffrey," said Judge Kyley. "I imagine this will end this affair, but it will make the sentencing of Joe Baggio tough, if he's convicted. I'll have a hard time finding a law to double the dose."

Wildcat had taken rods from the sleeping thugs. He handed one to big Jeffrey.

"The judge says no gunplay is wanted, Jeffrey," he grinned, "but you don't have to have a permit to carry another fellow's rod."

Wildcat was observing the chauffeur closely. So, Jeffrey had heard the voice of The Whisperer. How much more might he have heard or seen?

Anyway, the word would be passed through the hills that The Whisperer had appeared and struck once. The word would create consternation among certain crooks that had moved some of their activities outside the big city.

AN automobile horn squawked on a car coming up the grade. Wildcat got into the road and waved the driver down when the headlights caught him. A liveried chauffeur was driving and the car was a limousine.

A rather portly, benign-appearing man, with unusual sideburns of mixed gray on his cheeks, puffed from the car.

"I say, what is all this?" he exclaimed, with a marked English accent. "By Jove, Perkins! It's our newest neighbor, Judge Kyley! Perkins, get out and give the gentlemen a hand!"

The portly man stood there, blinking at the wreckage of the two cars. He looked about where two senseless men were in sight beside the road. One other was hidden in the ditch. The tall leader had disappeared.

"Well, I say, Judge Kyley, however did they come to be so blooming well knocked about?" he exclaimed.

Judge Kyley said: "You're Dundas, who lives above me in Ponto Hills. I'd seen you, but I'd never had the pleasure of meeting you. It was a bit of trouble, Mr. Dundas, but it's over with."

"They tried a holdup," said the quick-witted Wildcat, introducing himself. "I imagine they've collected plenty, and I came out here for a week of rest."

"Police Commissioner Gordon!" exclaimed Dundas. "Well, this jolly well is a pleasure, though the matter is unfortunate. Your wagon is out of commission. Will you honor me by accepting a lift, sir, you and the judge?"

Judge Kyley agreed to this as Jeffrey announced he would stay by the wagon and telephone the station settlement for a wrecking car. Judge Kyley's very British neighbor preceded them to his limousine.

Wildcat halted Judge Kyley a brief few seconds.

"I've a hunch it night be well to hold up on any explanations, Patrick," he cautioned. "Our investigation showed that Joe Baggio is using a phony alias. This fellow tonight said he was Joe's brother. Aside from Joe never having had a brother, that tall man you have described might be Court Jackson, and I've got it straight he's back in Ponto Hills running a setup of floating games."

DUNDAS gave an order for his chauffeur to drive directly to Judge Kyley's residence. The Dundas estate, Wildcat learned, was a mile or more beyond the judge's place.

The Englishman voiced a sympathetic complaint. He said he had refrained from hiring armed guards for his own place, but this affair tonight made it apparent he had been foolish.

"I was warned what to expect, when I came to America a year ago," stated the portly man. "But it

has been so blooming peaceful, you know, sort of like our own Lancashire."

Wildcat Gordon had said he believed the leader of the thugs in the road to be "Court" Jackson, who conducted "floating games." These consisted of transportable devices, which had been giving authorities in the city much trouble.

Moving quickly from one location to another, the gambling outfit offered a play to "investors" from the city. Wildcat Gordon recalled that his friend, Sheriff Callahan, was responsible for the county of Ponto Hills, and that he had recently mentioned unusual activity somewhere in the hills.

Wildcat knew Court Jackson to be a man who had never taken a rap, but who was reputed to be the brains behind the "floating games" and a numbers racket that was flourishing outside the city.

Wildcat was trying to evolve some possible reason for the Joe Baggio trick, when the Dundas limousine rolled up the driveway to the huge, square mansion of Judge Kyley.

Ann Kyley came running across the lawn, where bonfires of the party were still blazing. Her guests followed more slowly.

CHAPTER III
ONE CHINESE BOY RETURNS

"WE'LL not mention our little ruckus," Judge Kyley hastily admonished the others. "I don't want Ann to worry. We'll say we went into a ditch."

But Wildcat Gordon had glimpsed Ann Kyley's strained, white face as she came closer. The girl had seen the strange limousine, and was hesitating. Her guests were gathered in little groups behind her. It was plainly evident something had gone wrong.

"If I'd thought those rats had really been up here and caused trouble, I'd ' a' finished them," grunted Judge Kyley, being the first to get out of the car. "Ann, honey, what's happened?"

Ann Kyley failed to see her father's cut and bruised chin, because of the fact that he was holding a hand over it.

"It's Lun Woo, Father," she stated. "I think—oh, I'm sure something terrible has happened to him! The rug, that one in the library, and some other things have been stolen! And there was a—a stain on your desk—and Lun Woo can't be found!"

Judge Kyley's first exclamation was cut off by the grip of one of Wildcat's hands on his right arm.

"Keep quiet about the other, Patrick," he said, in a low tone. "Perhaps they fit together, and perhaps they don't."

The man Dundas could not have missed hearing Ann Kyley's words. He puffed from his car.

"My word, Judge Kyley!" he exclaimed. "It is turning out a blooming rotten homecoming for you! This beautiful, young lady would be your daughter?"

The alarmed judge made the proper introduction, but started a rapid-fire of questions.

"Then you didn't call the police, Miss Kyley?" stated Wildcat. "That may have been wise, and will give us a chance to get at the inside angle before the county coppers go pawing over things. Let's have a look at the library."

"If there's anything I can do, Judge Kyley," said Dundas.

"Come along, Dundas," invited the judge. "There was a party being held, and maybe this is someone's idea of a practical joke."

Judge Kyley's words were not convincing. Wildcat issued a quick order to two of the young men among the guests whom he had recognized.

"Do me the favor of keeping all the servants under close surveillance," he instructed.

ANN KYLEY and two young men led the way into the upper hallway of the bulking mansion. Before they entered, going up the broad stone steps, Wildcat Gordon gave the outside surroundings a sharply appraising glance.

He could understand—as the guests had said—how it would have been impossible for any person to have left the mansion during the progress of the party without being observed. Especially as that person or persons must have been burdened with an Oriental rug and several other weighty objects.

For the great house stood on a rolling eminence, from which a wide, smooth lawn sloped on all four sides. The nearest concealing shrubbery was nearly a hundred yards from the main building, which also housed the garage in a basement structure built under the mansion itself.

As they ascended the stairs to the locked library, Ann Kyley repeated with extraordinary calmness what she already had done in questioning the servants. Wildcat Gordon shot the girl a glance of approval. If there were only more women like that.

Judge Kyley took the library key from his daughter's hand when they stood before the door. Ann Kyley had said there was only the stain on her father's desk.

The heavy door swung silently open on its oiled hinges. The still-bright blaze of the fire danced across the high-beamed room.

"My word!" gasped the portly Dundas.

Wildcat Gordon's quick eyes saw what had brought that exclamation. He stepped rudely in front of Ann Kyley.

"Go back downstairs, Miss Kyley!" he rapped out. "Only before you go, you are sure you looked everywhere in the library before you locked it, and that it was empty?"

"Yes—yes, Mr. Gordon!" Ann Kyley had not seen what Wildcat, Dundas and her father had been staring at. "There was absolutely no one in there when I discovered the rug and some other things were gone!"

"Do as Wildcat says, Ann," said Judge Kyley, quickly. "Don't let any of the others come up. We'll attend to calling the police."

Through Wildcat's quick wit, Ann Kyley had been spared the horrible spectacle that had greeted the eyes of the three men. Judge Kyley closed and locked the door behind them, wiping tiny beads from his red forehead

"Great heavens, Wildcat!" he exploded. "What do you make of it?"

THEY were looking at the distorted features of a Chinese boy who was seated in a big, carved chair beside the ebony desk. His sleek hair was matted, and some blood had dried on his face.

The fearful Lun Woo had joined his honorable ancestors, but his body sat rigidly before them, as if he might have been sitting there watching when the rug he had held sacred had been removed.

Lun Woo was very dead. It was apparent his skull had been crushed with one blow. The heavy Ming vase bore indisputable evidence it was the murder weapon.

"Don't touch anything!" was Wildcat's snapped order, as Dundas went the color of green chalk and Judge Kyley remained transfixed in the middle of the floor.

It was unbelievable to Judge Kyley that this could have happened. The calm Ann Kyley had been in that room. There was the now dried stain of blood on the ebony desk. There were even the marks where the girl's slender fingertips had touched its edge.

"That rug, Wildcat, must have weighed a couple of hundred pounds, and it was so bulky that one man could hardly have handled it," said Judge Kyley. "With the vases and other stuff I see is missing, it would have made a small truckload."

Wildcat was gliding from point to point about the library. He was only adding to the puzzle. He ascertained that the window screens had not been tampered with from the outside, and they were locked.

Then the rug and other loot must have been taken through that single door. But when Wildcat had closely examined the dusty marks, he was sure the rug at least had not been pulled in that direction.

If there had been only one person, he had possessed superhuman strength. Yet that did not give a satisfactory answer. The library contained no closet, unless it was some secret space behind the rows of books, where Lun Woo's body could have been concealed while Ann Kyley was in the room.

Wildcat started going systematically over the shelves of books.

"I'd call the county police, and get Sheriff Callahan if you can, Patrick," said Wildcat, as he sounded every inch of the walls behind the books and in other spots.

"This is murder, and I'm out of my jurisdiction. I'd say offhand, someone must have used the door. There is no evidence of any falsework or secret exits. But I'll go over it again with Sheriff Callahan and the State police."

Dundas apparently had been trying to get something through his slow mind. A few minutes after Judge Kyley left the room to call the police, he started to talk.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "John Burton was a bit off before he went to Europe! Always was a happy sort of fellow, but something was bearing down on his mind! He had two big chaps guarding him the day he left!"

Judge Kyley came back into the room at that moment. He stared at Dundas. His look reflected the belief he could not have been tricked into some danger by his friend, John Burton, the owner of the mansion and its treasures.

"If there was anything like that, it must have

been strictly a personal threat," stated Judge Kyley loyally.

"You've jolly well hit upon it, Judge Kyley," Dundas hastened to say. "I recall a report it was something out of his past life had arisen to haunt him; therefore, it could not possibly have affected any other person."

WILDCAT GORDON absorbed this information. The explanation for John Burton's passing along his bargain mansion to Judge Kyley was logical enough. If Burton had only a personal fear of danger, he had no thought he might be letting his friend in for it.

"Looks like straight robbery, and the Chinese boy must have been in the way," stated Wildcat. "You've called Sheriff Callahan and the State police district station, Patrick?"

"They're on their way," said Judge Kyley. "Lun Woo was a good boy, Wildcat. With the exception of two, the servants go with the house; and they've been with John Burton for years."

"Two?"

"My chauffeur, Jeffrey, and a gardener who seemed badly in need of a job."

"I'll have a look around," said Wildcat, and left Dundas and Judge Kyley guarding the library.

Wildcat went directly to the kitchen and stood in the doorway observing the wrinkled, impassive face of Wah Kin. The police commissioner was aware that Oriental superstition is a ticklish element with which to deal.

Ann Kyley and a guest had mentioned something of Wah Kin's peculiar statements. Wildcat approached the ancient Chinaman by an indirect question.

"You liked Lun Woo, didn't you, Wah Kin?"

"Me like Lun Woo velly much, Commissioner Wildcat" was Wah Kin's surprising reply, as his veiled eyes took in his visitor's figure. He added: "You not velly big man for job."

Wildcat grinned at the odd comment of the old cook.

"Perhaps you had seen the rug that was stolen before it came into possession of John Burton?" suggested Wildcat.

Wah Kin passed out another surprise without any change of expression on his yellow face.

"Me one time humble servant of honorable rug of the Late Full Moon," he said. "When priests die and rug is sold, I go with rug. Maybe other servants from temple of the Late Full Moon follow rug. Lun Woo know something. He make prayer for honorable ancestors before the rug."

The bland voice held no emotion. To Wildcat's sharp question as to what might have happened, Wah Kin shrugged his shoulders slowly and spread his hands.

"Who can tell?" he said. "It was the Late Full Moon rug."

The scrawny body of Wah Kin prohibited any thought he might have accomplished the death of Lun Woo and removed the heavy rug and other objects. But the simple, apparent guilelessness of the Chinese servant was something that had to be dealt with in kind.

Wildcat asked only one other question: Did Wah Kin know of any secret passages in the mansion of John Burton? Wah Kin said that he did not. Wildcat did not pursue the subject further.

Ann Kyley's guests remained in huddled groups. Wildcat walked slowly around the great house in the moonlight. The rocky, tree-clad shoulder of a hill arose some distance behind the mansion. The house had been so built as to command a panorama view of its surroundings.

The original builder might have been of Teutonic origin, or he could have once visited the Rhineland country of Europe. Seen at a little distance, the mansion bulked like one of the famed castles on the Rhine.

Four square, windowless towers or turrets gave this impression of feudal days. Wildcat was looking at this feature when he heard police sirens coming up the road. He tarried only long enough to make a closer inspection.

Wildcat discovered—and confirmed it more in detail later—that the towers of the mansion meant nothing as a part of the main building. They were merely framed falsework set into the sloping roof, and had not been designed for observation. The roof was built solidly under each of the towers of medieval architecture.

WILDCAT greeted Sheriff Callahan as he arrived with several deputies, closely followed by half a dozen State policemen. Sheriff Callahan had for some time been a close friend and ally of Wildcat's. If he had possessed a mole on his face in the right spot, the rugged, angular county sheriff might have been a replica of Abraham Lincoln.

Though murder had been reported, Sheriff Callahan's speech was slow, drawling and unexpected.

"So you thought you'd come to the country for a week of quiet, Wildcat," he said. "You seem to be a magnet for trouble. But watch your step, Mr. Commissioner, and remember you're outside your own bailiwick."

Wildcat grinned and accompanied the deputies and police to the library. Sheriff Callahan was smart, and the State police were thorough.

"We'll take this house together, beginning at the bottom and going to the top," instructed the sheriff.

"Don't leave anyplace unsearched, and don't at any time spread out so some one possibly hiding in the house could pass the lines. I'm posting men at all four corners outside, and no person is to leave the grounds."

As the search began, the station wagon was pulled into the space before the garage under the house. Jeffrey came from a village tow car to grunt his low-voiced profanity when told of the murder of Lun Woo and the robbery.

The big chauffeur, with one eye closed by the attack on the highway, stayed close by Judge Kyley as Sheriff Callahan's fine-toothed comb of the law went through the mansion from basement to garret.

Wildcat made sure that not a single closet or other space in the big house was overlooked. The police were amazed at the magnitude of the fortune in valuable furnishings in different rooms, and their knowledge of art did not enable them to place a tenth of the real value upon any object.

Nearly an hour had passed before they stood in the wide, barren attic under the roof.

"A mouse couldn't have slipped through," stated Judge Kyley. "The walls are thick, but we have sounded every inch of them. You can see all that the attic holds in one glance, and there is no exit up here. It's maddening!"

"Confoundedly so, Judge Kyley," observed Dundas. "It is incredible, sir! You are sure we have overlooked nothing?"

Wildcat Gordon passed all around the attic. He made sure the square, Teutonic towers were what they seemed, falsework set upon roof joists and closed off by plain planking.

The tight police net had netted nothing. The great Oriental rug could not possibly be in the mansion or about it. The solid concrete of the basement floor and walls had been minutely sounded.

Wildcat whipped away from the others and found Ann Kyley. He now inquired if a man had come to the mansion to see Judge Kyley before he arrived.

"Yes, some men in a car," stated the calm girl. "A tall man inquired for father, and said he might meet him on the way from the station. I don't see how he could have missed you."

"He didn't miss us, but perhaps he wishes he had," commented Wildcat dryly. "You will have all of the servants assembled for Sheriff Callahan and the State troopers, Miss Kyley."

A FEW minutes later, the servants, who now had heard the news of the murder and robbery, were assembled for Sheriff Callahan's questionings.

Wildcat studied each of the men and women in turn. The terror of each was genuine, and the old housekeeper confirmed the report of Dundas.

"Yes, Mr. Burton was badly scared about something," she stated. "But nothing was ever missing from the house, and it was himself, I guess, for he hired two men to look out for him. They even went to Europe with him."

Three persons being questioned showed no evidence of fear. One was Wah Kin, whose inscrutable face never changed as he once more repeated that Lun Woo had made prayers to the sacred rug. Sheriff Callahan was for taking the Chinaman into custody.

"Which would close off all possible information from that one source," advised Wildcat quietly. "That new gardener, Jimson, is holding out on you, Sheriff."

Jimson, the gardener, far from betraying terror, was sullen and inclined to parry questioning.

"How could a man hear anything unusual with all them people hootin' and howlin' around so honest folks couldn't sleep?" was his growl. "Any of 'em could've done it. They was the ones had the only chance."

Jeffrey, the chauffeur, was the third who kept complaining that if the place had not been all cluttered up with police, he might have found something himself.

Wildcat concentrated on Jimson, the gardener. His cottage set close to the entrance gate. But Jimson had not been in his cottage trying to sleep when he had been summoned. Wildcat had seen him emerge from a pathway leading down from a shoulder of the hill.

Wildcat did not mention this feature to Sheriff Callahan. All outbuildings, the gardener's cottage among them, had been thoroughly searched.

Sheriff Callahan was now ordering a tight guard all around the house, and telling the servants there must be no attempt to leave the place, when Wildcat saw the sullen Jimson slipping unobtrusively outside.

Only the four deputies were then at the corners of the big house. Wildcat was close behind Jimson, who was scuttling along with bent shoulders near a wall of the mansion. Evidently the gardener knew the value of lights and shadows when a moon is shining.

For Jimson crossed on a line between two deputies and gained concealment of the shrubbery before he was seen. Wildcat watched the direction taken by the gardener, and saw he was moving back to the hillside path.

At this moment, Dundas, the English neighbor, was taking leave of Judge Kyley. He was entering his limousine, and Wildcat heard his generous offer of any assistance he could give.

Wildcat walked past a deputy on guard, but did not mention his objective. He crossed the upper

lawn and when he was in the shrubbery moved with catlike speed and tread toward the path taken by Jimson.

Wildcat found the rocky path. Apparently it led toward the single, curving highway. Wildcat paused to listen. A dry stick cracked under the feet of the man ahead of him. The path here was lined with bush like two walls. Wildcat's own ground-gripping soles made no sound. He was gaining rapidly on the gardener.

Had the man's sullenness been affected to cover some furtive fear? Jimson had employed the readiest expedient of a man who may fear he is suspected. He had attempted to throw suspicion on others, preferably Ann Kyley's guests.

The checkup on the guests made any such theory fantastic. All were young folks of the best families. Sheriff Callahan had detained none of them. Their cars now were moving down the grade.

SUDDENLY, Wildcat became aware the gardener must have halted. He dropped and laid an ear to the ground. There was no sound, except the occasional dripping of dew off the bushes.

Wildcat arose and crept forward silently. He had no flashlight and was compelled to depend wholly upon the occasional pencils of illumination coming from the moon through the trees.

Wildcat glimpsed the straight outline of the stone wall bordering the road. He swore under his breath. Apparently his man had gained the wall and gone over it. What had been his reason for stealing away, getting to the outside?

Wildcat reached the stone wall, but he did not climb it. Instead, he scratched a match and by its tiny flare saw the black huddle at the end of the pathway was a body. A body with the hair matted into crushed bone at the back of the skull.

A smooth, round rock lay close to the head. Like the Ming vase in the library, the marks upon it showed it was a murder weapon. The sullen gardener, Jimson, had been killed without having uttered a cry. Even the blow must have been muffled by the hands of someone who had lain in wait at the end of the path.

Wildcat climbed to the top of the wall. He had armed himself, and he had an automatic pistol in one hand. He had no use for the weapon. The trail ended here, for the path led only to notches in the stone wall whereby anyone could climb to the highway.

Wildcat swiftly searched Jimson's clothing. Except for a lead pencil and a notebook with some gardening stuff written down, there was nothing unusual. Wildcat went back to report this second murder. At least Wah Kin could not have been up here.

CHAPTER IV
THE FIGHTING JUDGE

JUDGE PATRICK KYLEY was a fighting man to the core. The word of the gardener's murder brought him to one firm conclusion.

"It's some damnable effort to frighten and coerce my court, Wildcat!" he proclaimed, bitterly. "I didn't tell you, but this whole thing started earlier tonight. Jeffrey told me at the station he was late because a timer had been stolen from the motor of the station wagon. Luckily, he had another timer that fitted."

"It might be wise for you and Ann to go back to the city until this thing is cleaned up," suggested Wildcat Gordon. "The coppers outside haven't discovered even a trace of the man who must have killed Jimson. At least that eliminates Wah Kin to a certain extent, for he was back in his kitchen when I followed the gardener up the hill."

"Quit!" grated Judge Kyley. "Let rats scare me! Not while I'm alive! Maybe it might be best to send Ann along to town, but I'm staying here until this mystery is cleared up!

"As for Jimson, I took him on myself, because he looked like he needed a job badly! But it looks like he must have been hooked up with this some way, and maybe his pals were afraid he had talked, or would!"

A police captain of the State police had entered the living room and was waiting. He came forward with grimness on his youthful face.

"I'll have to clear Jimson, I guess," he stated sadly. "Perhaps we overstepped our authority, Judge Kyley, but your gardener was not named Jimson, but Jim Saunders. And Jim was one of our best undercover men."

Wildcat Gordon nodded slowly.

"I got some idea of that from his hands," he said, "but I was waiting until you saw fit to announce it. Put him on the job to look after the judge, eh?"

"That was it, Commissioner Gordon. We have the heartiest respect and liking for Judge Kyley, and Ponto Hills is isolated. It was decided to have one of our men standing by. I'm much afraid Jim Saunders knew something, but followed his instructions too closely. He was ordered to make all reports directly to the district commander."

"Then he was on his way to make that report, you believe?" said Wildcat.

"That's it."

It was clear enough to the three grim men. Jim Saunders, following his line of duty, had withheld whatever he might have known until he could make a report as ordered. Perhaps he had believed it best to maintain his gardener's identity, for it had become apparent that the murderer or murderers had struck from the inside.

Wildcat wondered who could have known Jim Saunders would go back by the path over the stone wall. For the State police captain then imparted the information that Saunders had made a routine report to the district station earlier in the night, but had apparently known nothing at that time of the Lun Woo killing.

He had been returning from that trip when Wildcat had seen him first coming down the pathway.

SOON after that, Wildcat persuaded Judge Kyley he should retire. Wildcat made a round of the bulking mansion. State police and deputies formed a tight ring around the house on the exposed lawn. Nothing less than the spirit of Houdini apparently could have passed the lines.

Wildcat returned to the house, smiling grimly. He was planning to break that tight police line, and not in the person of Wildcat Gordon. It must be thought that Wildcat Gordon was in his room when he attempted a foray into the night for his own purposes.

As Wildcat passed along the upper hallway, he heard one of the housemaids speaking with Ann Kyley.

"But I think someone should spend the night with you, miss," she was pleading. "I'm not much frightened, but I would like to sleep on the couch, and then I would know you are all right, miss."

The maid was very much in earnest. Wildcat imagined she might be afraid to go alone to her own room, but Ann Kyley's reply assured him it was not that.

"You'll spend the rest of the night with the housekeeper, Mary," said Ann Kyley. "I appreciate it just the same, but I would rather be alone."

The calm daughter of the judge now knew of the two murders, but there was no tremor in her voice. Some spirit for a woman was the swift reflection of Wildcat. If she wasn't who she was, the daughter of a famous judge, what a wife she would make for a copper, possibly even a police commissioner.

Wildcat passed on to his room. Possibly to give him the week of quiet he sought, Judge Kyley had placed him on the third floor, where several guest bedrooms were thus separated from the rest of the house.

Wildcat smiled grimly when he went by Judge Kyley's door. For the big Jeffrey had brought a deep chair and placed it close to the judge's room in the hallway. The bulky figure sprawled in the chair, nodding drowsily, but very apparently determined to see that no harm came to his employer.

Jeffrey grunted a good-night to Wildcat as he went up the third-floor stairs.

ABOUT this time, Ann Kyley had entered her own room and was disrobing. This bedroom, like many others in the house, was fitted expensively, with many articles of value to delight a woman's heart.

Ann Kyley sighed regretfully as she placed her jewelry on a dressing table that was of a period to make it more valuable than the gems reflected in its mirror. All of these surroundings had been so pleasant, so much more luxurious than anything she had ever dreamed of enjoying.

Now tonight, all of the girl's keen zest was destroyed by icy fingers of dread clutching at her heart. The mansion that had been so like some Cinderella's palace had become like some vast monster of mystery. It was filled with little sounds, all suggestive of the fear pervading the servants, the ominous threat hovering over it.

Ann Kyley was afraid for her father. She had learned now of the strange attack on the highway. In another year or two, she had hoped Judge Kyley would retire from the bench—from that dangerous frontline of the law where he had incurred the revengeful hatred of criminals of every degree.

Here in Ponto Hills there could now be no peace. Ann Kyley was convinced the luxurious surroundings could never more than remind her of this terrible night.

Her cool eyes looked at her favorites, two small pictures on the walls. Only a lover of art would have known their immense value.

One canvas was "A Fisherman," by Whistler. The other was a Rembrandt portrait. The girl knew these were worth thousands each. And here in the residence of a judge hated by many crooks.

Ann Kyley switched off the light and walked to the window. The moonlight streamed across the lawn. She could see the shadows of the deputies and police. Tonight, anyway, her father would be safe. Tomorrow, she intended to insist they give up all this, but she knew it would be a task.

Judge Patrick Kyley never had retreated under fire.

Ann Kyley slipped into the luxurious bed and attempted to turn her thoughts upon more pleasant things. She slept fitfully, dreaming of newspaper headlines that seemed to come gliding out of the darkness toward her bed.

One of these black headlines grew in her dream to monstrous size. It seemed to fill one side of the room, casting a fantastic shadow upon one wall. Ann Kyley slowly opened her eyes.

THE girl stifled her sudden impulse to scream. A tall man was moving slowly across the room. The moonlight from the window showed one hand uplifted, as if the intruder were preparing to strike. The hand gripped a bludgeon.

The jewelry on the dressing table was valuable

enough to have tempted any thief. Ann Kyley saw the pencil ray of a flashlight reveal the glittering jewelry. But the light passed over the gems, and the man moved on.

His light played around the edges of the Whistler canvas. The man reached up and removed the picture quickly, his head turning toward the bed where the girl was apparently sleeping. She could hear a deep, repressed breath as if the intruder were unconsciously betraying satisfaction.

The light flicked off and the man came toward the bed. Ann Kyley was rigid, but she made her breathing deep and regular. She could feel the small flare of the flashlight playing over her features, but she succeeded in keeping her lips slightly parted and feared only the fierce throbbing of the pulse in her throat might betray her.

Again came that sucking breath of satisfaction. Ann Kyley felt the light leave, and she attempted to gain a glimpse of the intruder's face. She was thinking fast. How could he have entered the house with the place ringed by the police?

The answer was simple enough. He had not entered, because he had been there all of the time. She thought of the suspicious position of Wah Kin, the cook, but this big man was not Wah Kin. His shadowy outline was unfamiliar, as much as the girl could see of it.

The girl's mind switched to the police guard outside, under her window. There was a narrow balcony outside, as there was outside most of the windows of other sleeping rooms. If she could in some manner reach the window and give an alarm before the thief could reach her—

The man was removing the second canvas. His breath of appreciation came with the flicking on and off of the flashlight. Perhaps as he left the room, she could give a warning. If she could only get through the screen, outside, she judged she night even drop to the lawn, one story below. She had always been athletic.

The girl was cool enough at this moment to smile over the amazement of the State police if Ann Kyley dropped among them clad only in her filmy nightdress.

The intruder tarried a moment. He was over in a far corner of the room. Ann Kyley slipped softly from bed; then she crept silently toward the window.

At this same instant, a figure clothed all in gray, that merged with the walls of the mansion, was swinging noiselessly along on stone projections directly over Ann Kyley's window. If the girl had seen this mysterious climber, she would not have been so sure of success when her hands were touching the thin window screen.

The strange figure in gray poised for a few seconds above Ann Kyley's window balcony. This projection helped to conceal his movements from the police guard on the lawn below.

The two things happened simultaneously. The gray-clad man let go his hold and dropped lightly to the balcony floor. Ann Kyley crashed her lithesome body through the window screen and screamed shrilly.

"Up here! In my room! Get him!"

Ann Kyley did not follow her plan to drop to the lawn, nor did she repeat her scream of warning. A hard, dry hand abruptly closed over her mouth. Real terror gripped the girl now as she was roughly thrust aside.

"Stay here! Don't move!"

IT was only a whisper, but eerie and penetrating enough to curdle the girl's blood. A weird, chilling command, and then the gray figure sprang through the broken screen into the room.

Ann Kyley saw only the gray blur of the man's body as he let her go. Then her terror partly subsided. For the man in gray had an automatic pistol, and he must have come as a friend.

But why, how, from where?

The girl's shrill scream had brought the police guards to their toes. Deputies and State coppers were running and shouting. Doors were banging on the ground floor.

The figure in gray darted across Ann Kyley's room. The bewildered girl saw him switch on the lights momentarily, his pistol held ready. But the picture thief had vanished. The girl's jewels were lying untouched on the dressing table. The faded spots showed where the pictures had been hanging.

The door leading into the hallway was closed. Coppers were pounding onto the stairs when Ann Kyley saw the shadow of the gray figure go through the opening and closing door.

In the hallway, the door to Judge Kyley's room was open a few inches and Jeffrey's chair was empty. The gray figure slipped past this and up the third-floor stairs. It moved directly to Wildcat Gordon's door and passed in.

Then the man in gray, who showed a long chin and upper lip, and a whitish blur of hair, bearing no resemblance in any detail to Wildcat Gordon, removed oddly shaped dental plates from between his jaws. His face instantly resumed its normal shape.

For the man was The Whisperer.

The dental plates that had changed his appearance were laid aside, when Wildcat Gordon heard Judge Kyley talking with Jeffrey in the hallway.

WILDCAT changed quickly from the gray suit he was wearing into night garments. He removed a silvery powder from his brownish-red hair and

pulled on a bathrobe.

"Guess I didn't do so good that time, as Quick Trigger would say," Wildcat muttered to himself. "There is only one answer to this thing: I've got to find out what connection Court Jackson and the attack on the road has with all this stuff.

Wildcat had talked with Sheriff Callahan before deciding to get outside in the guise of the Whisperer and seek a "floating game," the sheriff said he knew to be somewhere in Ponto Hills. He was convinced that where such gambling opportunity would be, he would find Court Jackson.

A hard, dry hand abruptly closed over Ann Kyley's mouth. Real terror gripped the girl now as she was roughly shoved aside.

Wildcat believed the murder solution, the answer to the menace that hovered over Judge Kyley's household, lay outside. He was sure the Oriental rug and other valuable objects had been removed from the mansion.

As to how or by whom, there was not the faintest clue thus far. The rigid searching of the big house had left no possible place inside where these things could have been concealed.

"And when they go looking for what they've taken out of Ann Kyley's room, they'll find neither the pictures nor the thief," said Wildcat in an amusing tone. "I may be out of my bailiwick, as Sheriff Callahan claims, but this shoots the idea of a quiet week."

He carefully concealed The Whisperer's attire and went into the hallway as a storm of excited voices broke in the vicinity of Ann Kyley's room.

CHAPTER V
WILDCAT SUMMONS HELP

WILDCAT GORDON was rubbing his eyes sleepily, and he had a police gun in one hand as he came down the stairs from the third floor. Apparently he had thrown a robe hastily over violently blue pajamas. Judge Kyley was with Jeffrey in the upper hallway.

The deputies and police had ascended both front and backstairs with a rush, as soon as they could get into the house after hearing Ann Kyley scream. Judge Kyley's face was ashen.

"If anything's happened to Ann," he groaned, "I'll never forgive myself for being so hard-headed as to stay here!"

The judge breathed with relief as Ann Kyley appeared from her room, with a fleecy negligee thrown over her nightdress.

The bulky Jeffrey was swearing in a low voice.

"If I could only get my hands on something," he gritted to Wildcat, "I'd take 'em apart a piece at a time!"

"A fine idea," approved Wildcat. "But let's see what it's all about first."

Judge Kyley had his arms around his bewitching daughter.

"The pictures," said the girl, pointing to the walls of her room. "There were two of them, one watching outside, I think. But why would they take the pictures and leave the jewelry?"

Wildcat saw a diamond brooch, a pearl necklace and several good rings on the dressing table. But Judge Kyley shook his head.

"Why fool around with mere playthings when those pictures were worth at least forty thousand apiece? Wildcat how are we going to end this damnable thing?"

The police were awakening the servants. Within two minutes all were accounted for as having been in their rooms. Jeffrey swore he had seen no one in the hallway, but sheepishly admitted he had been dozing and was awakened by the police shouting below.

ANN KYLEY was white-faced, but she said little as the police prosecuted a hasty search throughout the mansion. They arrived at exactly zero in their efforts, though they again sifted the house from basement to attic.

Then Ann Kyley told them: "The man on the balcony was all in gray, and I could not see his face but he had whitish hair. He did not speak loudly, but he whispered—a hissing sound that made me shiver. He went into my room as if he intended to get the man who was there; but he must have gone with him."

Consternation was painted across a score of ruddy faces of the county coppers. Judge Kyley himself stared, his lips moving stiffly.

"It couldn't—it couldn't be The Whisperer."

The rugged Sheriff Callahan had come in. He spoke in his slow, unexcited voice.

"The details, as far as your daughter got them, check up with The Whisperer. Plague on him, Wildcat! If you couldn't nab him with your smart department, what's a bunch of hick cops going to do?"

"The Whisperer?" repeated Judge Kyley. "Could all of this mystery be wrapped around that super-crook? It might be, and yet I've never heard of anyone but a crook killer ever dying at his hands. But it must have been him out on the road tonight."

Sheriff Callahan scratched his head and told the judge he was forgetting something.

"Remember them apartment house murders and that cleanup on a counterfeit bond sales gang, Judge? Didn't the police give out that the leader of them crooks was The Whisperer?"*

"That's right," assented Judge Kyley. "They reported he was dead, but I never took much stock in it. How about it, Wildcat?"

"Hasn't been heard from since then," stated Wildcat.

Sheriff Callahan uttered one of his rare oaths.

"Alive or dead, if The Whisperer's foolin' around in my county, I'll show you a trick or two, Wildcat!" he promised.

"I'm beginning to think the week is going to be nice and quiet," stated Wildcat. "I'd advise putting a copper in every room in the house and keep that line outside."

Sheriff Callahan grinned slightly.

"See that you enjoy your rest, Wildcat, and don't forget you're in my bailiwick," he cautioned.

*See *The Six Pyramids of Death.*

Nevertheless, Wildcat Gordon was clothed in one of his most gorgeous suits, with a red necktie and a red carnation in his coat label, and walking down the highway alone within the next half hour.

He had suddenly decided the crimes were beyond the grasp of the county authorities. There were beginning to be ramifications in this that no doubt reached right into the heart of the city underworld.

Wildcat told Judge Kyley he was going for a little stroll outside. He had spent a few minutes in a room on the ground floor that was called the museum. It was a room filled with valuable curios. Among the varied collections was one of the most complete of odd and little-known weapons Wildcat had ever seen.

DICK TRAEGER

Hilts of daggers and swords were crusted with jewels. These were spaced against tapestry that was in itself worth a fortune. John Burton had had millions with which to play. Apparently his idea of a good time ran to collecting bizarre objects, regardless of the cost.

FOR a few minutes, Wildcat had stood alone in this room. There he became conscious of an odd scent. But he quickly identified the aromatic odor. Probably it had been spiced preservatives used on the expensive tapestries.

One element of this was easily recognized.

It was this scent that had given Wildcat an idea, and it was his reason for leaving the house alone.

As Wildcat had passed through the police lines, Sheriff Callahan's angular jaw showed a whimsical smile

"I think I've said enough about him stayin' in his own bailiwick to start Wildcat on a rampage," he told Judge Kyley. "And if Wildcat gets going, he'll get to the bottom of this if he has to pull up a few of the hills."

He had not trusted using a telephone in the judge's house. If rugs and pictures and vases could be made to disappear in thin air, it could hardly be expected a telephone message could get through without being known.

Wildcat spoke into the highway phone. A girl's musical voice replied.

"Oh, Wildcat, how nice of you to call! Been thinking about me?"

"I couldn't say over the wire what I've been thinking about you!" snapped Wildcat. "Let me speak to Quick Trigger! I've no time to waste on children!"

A distinct smacking sound came over the wire. The girl who answered was "Tiny" Traeger. Wildcat had asked for her grandfather, "Quick Trigger," properly named Dick Traeger, a former deputy commissioner of police.

Dick Traeger was now in his sixties, and retired on pension against his will. He owned a penthouse in a loft building in the city of steel. His record as a copper had given him the name of Quick Trigger.

Quick Trigger had been almost a father to Wildcat Gordon. Wildcat now had rooms in the Quick Trigger penthouse. Tiny Traeger, who was twenty, with curly black hair and blue eyes, was doll-like in size and looked like a child.

Tiny had been in love with Wildcat ever since she could remember. The hard-boiled Wildcat never suspected it, or, if he did, considered himself too ancient at thirty to think about Tiny as other than a child.

Quick Trigger's eager voice came over the wire.

"Whatcha wantin' this hour of the night, Wildcat?"

"Got no time to tell you anything much, Quick Trigger," stated Wildcat. "I want you to get Brian Boru and bring him tonight, after dark, to the Elm Tree Inn at the foot of Ponto Hills. Get yourself a room and wait there until you hear from me. There's hell and all to pay up here."

"I'll be on the job, Wildcat!" came Quick Trigger's eager assent. "Keep your feet on the ground, son, and stay out of a jam until I see you!"

WILDCAT replaced the telephone. He had asked Quick Trigger to bring Brian Boru. Brian Boru was a black Scottish terrier. Strangely enough, he was a dog who did not know Wildcat Gordon, for The Whisperer was his only master.

Closing the phone box, Wildcat walked back along the highway toward Judge Kyley's mansion. The moon was getting low, but still gave sufficient light to see fifty yards or so.

He reached a point not far from the big house, around a curve, of which there were many. He saw two men walking toward him and he smiled grimly. They were in State police uniforms. Wildcat surmised that Sheriff Callahan had ordered the coppers to keep an eye on him.

The trimly uniformed coppers apparently recognized Wildcat and snapped up their hands in salute. Too late, Wildcat saw that pistols had whipped into the two men's other hands.

"Well, Wildcat Gordon, you wasn't smart enough to keep out of this!" snapped one of the bogus coppers. "The boss had a good idea you might get into his hair! You'll turn around and walk ahead!"

Wildcat turned around and walked ahead. The nose of one man was twitching, and he had almost no pupils in his narrowed eyes. That man would welcome the opportunity to use his pistol.

A car had been held waiting under the trees in a lane at one side of the highway.

"Seeing you've got me," said Wildcat, quietly, perhaps you'll tell me how that stuff was taken out of Judge Kyley's place?"

"When you know that, your life won't be worth a plugged dime," said one of his captors. "The boss isn't so sure you don't know, and that makes it very unfortunate for you."

Wildcat did not reply. He saw the third man, the car's driver, had a badly battered face. He was one of the men with "Court" Jackson during the attack on Judge Kyley. Wildcat's theory connecting Court Jackson with the murders and mysterious robberies seemed borne out.

The car twisted along a crooked lane. Wildcat sat quiet, with two pistols pressing into his ribs. It was difficult to guess the direction taken by the car, due to the numerous curves and shifting moonlight. Generally, Wildcat believed, the lane was paralleling the highway running past Judge Kyley's mansion.

The driver suddenly drew up and stopped.

"Out here, Mr. Commissioner!" ordered one of the men. "And you'll walk ahead down the path!"

Wildcat walked ahead on a stony, steeply descending pathway, which led under trees so thick the moonlight was shut out. He had studied the possibility of outwitting his two captors, but then the driver had left the car and was trailing along.

It seemed impossible there could be any human habitation in the tangled thicket through which the steep path curved. Were these fellows carrying out a definite, final assignment? There were many of the underworld who would have wanted no finer opportunity than the getting of Commissioner Wildcat Gordon into some lonely spot.

While the driver of the car had been an ordinary gorilla, the two posing as State policemen were of a higher type of crook.

Wildcat had noted their speech to be considerably above the usual gang lingo. That meant they were closely associated with some leader who must be in the upper strata of criminals.

The pathway was narrow, and only one man could keep a pistol in Wildcat's back. The darkness deepened and the hill still was steep. Once Wildcat's foot slipped on a rolling stone. His captors growled at him to watch his step.

Wildcat did just that. He watched his step until a groping foot touched another loose rock. What happened then was incredibly fast. Wildcat's feet flew from under him, or so it seemed. But the instant before his feet left the ground, the sinewy legs had propelled him upward and to one side.

IT was a desperate chance to take, and so close that the pistol nearest him belched scorching powder along his ribs, but the slug missed. The automatic was silenced in the midst of its explosions. Perhaps his captors had believed Wildcat was falling, for the second man blazed away at the ground.

The sudden mêlée in that gloomy thicket much resembled the moment when a pack of hounds suddenly overtake a raccoon or some of the other fierce fighters

Wildcat was in a position where he could justify his name. All the rules and ethics went overboard, and Wildcat cut down the nearest man with both feet and fists.

The second man was quick and squeezed to one side in the bush, but Wildcat dived headlong, his head and snapping arms catching the man around the knees. Their bodies plunged into thorny bushes where spikes ripped their clothing and skin.

The other man attempted to bring his pistol into play, and he was pointing the muzzle along one of Wildcat's shoulders when Wildcat viced onto the gun wrist. A bone snapped with the sickening crack of a stick breaking.

Wildcat rolled into the path just in time to receive the third man's right foot under one ear. The blow dazed him and sent him rolling several feet down the hill. Wildcat suddenly groaned, went limp and stretched out his arms.

"Come on, fellows! I've got the smart mug!" snarled the man who had been driving the car.

He jumped down beside Wildcat, bending over him. His mistake was in putting too much dependence in the power of his foot. Wildcat's legs doubled, and that was one kick that was returned with compound interest.

Both of Wildcat's heels buried themselves in the thug's stomach. The man let out a gasp like a suddenly exploded inner tube and crashed on his back. Wildcat snapped to his feet, getting one of his pistols into play for the first time. He produced handcuffs.

Kicking the thug to his feet, he ordered him to manacle the other pair together, and the man did it, groaning and retching with stomach

convulsions. Wildcat had ordered the three men to turn around and walk back up the pathway they had descended.

But they were not to reach the lane. Others apparently had heard the shooting.

"That you, Kicker?" yelled a voice from the hillside below.

Several men were pounding up the pathway. Others were making the thicket crackle from two sides. Wildcat judged there were at least half a dozen men and that they were detouring to get above him. It was impossible to keep his prisoners and escape the trap.

Wildcat slipped into the bushes and reached the main roadway alone, while his pursuers were still groping through the thicket.

CHAPTER VI
ESCAPE AND A MURDER

WILDCAT GORDON calmly stated he had been exploring and took a header over a hill, thus explaining his disheveled appearance and several bruises. He avoided adding to Judge Kyley's anxiety.

But Judge Kyley said: "You're a liar, Wildcat, but we'll let it pass. I've been figuring things out. This whole thing is a frame-up to coerce the court in this Joe Baggio case. These rats are so accustomed to buying their way out of trouble that when they can't do that, they hesitate at nothing."

Wildcat had his own theory and it did not exactly coincide with that of Judge Kyley; yet within a short time it seemed that the jurist might have been correct. For, after the final few hours until dawn passed without further incident, a telephone call brought Wildcat from his room, again in his violently blue pajamas.

The voice on the phone was slow and unexcited. Another man making the same report to his chief would probably have betrayed some emotion. But the man talking was Detective Sergeant Thorsen, Wildcat's right-hand man in a troubled police department.

"Got bad news, Chief," stated the cool Thorsen, who had both a wooden face and a wooden voice. "Joe Baggio busted the works last night, and he's on the loose."

"Baggio?" said Wildcat. "Orders were for a special guard on his cell."

"Right, Chief. And that's why Detective Rantz is nursing a sore head. This is what happened."

Thorsen said the first word of Joe Baggio's escape came when a wild-eyed jailer dashed into the headquarters office with his story. The jailer had just been for a walk—a little walk that took him to the outside, with the revolver of Detective Rantz thrust into his back.

Detective Rantz had not been using the gun. The detective, who had been assigned as special guard on Joe Baggio's cell, had been at the moment on the floor of Baggio's cell, with the door locked and his own handcuffs holding him to an iron pipe.

Rantz told how he had been tricked. Though the jailer had been nearby, Joe Baggio had asked for a cigarette light. Rantz said he had obliged. As he turned away, one long arm of Joe Baggio whipped through the bars, caught his neck and jammed his head against the steel with stunning force.

The jailer, becoming curious, walked into a trap. Joe Baggio waited until the man was close enough to be in direct range. He had secured the revolver of Detective Rantz. With the gun, he had forced the jailer to unlock the cell door and help put the detective inside.

"That's Rantz's story, huh?" snapped Wildcat. "You can inform Rantz he is suspended, pending investigation! We don't need dicks dumb enough to fall for that old cigarette trick! And I suppose there was a car waiting, and Baggio made a clean getaway?"

"That's right, Chief. But there's another matter. We have a report that Arthur Watson, the chief witness against Joe Baggio, is missing from his home. He was supposed to have attended a show alone, but he had not returned this morning."

WILDCAT GORDON hung up. Judge Kyley was preparing to go into the city. Though he had adjourned court, he had a day's business to clean up. When he heard the Joe Baggio report, he reiterated that this whole mystery had centered around the Baggio case.

Wildcat was now clad in all of his morning glory. Only one gray-blue eye was visible under the brim of his army hat. He shook his head slowly.

"I'd say the Joe Baggio case is nothing but a red herring across the trail to disguise the real reason for what has happened," he stated. "These ghost-like thieves in the house are bent upon only one object: They want us—or you—out of this house, Patrick."

"But the Baggio witness, Wildcat? They have done away with witnesses before. I know the Watson family. Watson had guts enough to go for a ride before he would back up."

Wildcat did not express it, but he was more concerned than the judge. He was convinced the witness, Arthur Watson, would be found. Other witnesses always turned up. But in the ditch, dead.

With the mansion cordoned by police, and with Wildcat Gordon on the scene, Judge Kyley felt his daughter Ann would be safe enough during the day. None of the State coppers, or Sheriff Callahan,

looked for any recurrence of last night's attack.

On Wildcat's tip-off, Sheriff Callahan had deputies searching the woods in the vicinity of his encounter with the bogus State policemen. Up until noon, they had discovered nothing.

Wildcat was in the room containing the many valuable curios shortly after noon. He studied the array of rare weapons gathered from many countries. He moved about softly from one object to another.

As he looked about with apparent carelessness, a strange thing happened. The room had been filled with the faint aroma of spices, a preservative that no doubt had been applied years before to the tapestries of priceless value.

But as Wildcat went from one spot to another, this odor definitely increased. A small vial in one of Wildcat's hands was the reason. He permitted a drop to fall from this here and there on the costly rugs. Several valuable canvases on the walls were rubbed with it.

When he had finished his inspection of the room, the aroma was pleasing, but much more pronounced. It might have come from some spice factory. But the predominating odor was that of cinnamon oil.

"It might, or it might not work," said Wildcat, in a musing tone. "But we'll leave the outcome to Brian Boru."

Wildcat was still dissatisfied with his failure to discover a possible secret exit. After completing the spreading of the new aroma in the room, he went slowly from one object to another. The walls had been expertly gone over.

An immense table of carved teakwood sat in the middle of the room. Wildcat noted this was placed on a thick rug. He got down and crawled under the table, his sensitive fingers prodding every inch of the rug.

The shrill scream of a woman from another part of the house came into the stillness with such suddenness that Wildcat jerked up his head, receiving a forcible bump against the table. He slid back and reached the door in two strides.

The scream had been short, abruptly cut off. Wildcat knew it was not the voice of Ann Kyley. It must then be one of the upstairs maids. Wildcat fixed the direction as that of the library in which Lun Woo had been murdered.

SHORTLY before Wildcat had gone into the curio room downstairs, Ann Kyley had determined upon a secret investigation of her own. The bewitching daughter of the judge was calm and nervy.

Moreover, Ann Kyley had been a reader of detective stories. She did not put much faith in the efficacy of the county and State police. In all the stories she had read, the police had always overlooked some vital element.

They had discovered nothing in the murder library; Ann Kyley believed she was unobserved when she entered the grim room. But one maid saw her pass through the door. This maid, at the moment, was concealed by some draperies of an alcove in the hallway.

The maid's manner was furtive, and when Ann Kyley was in the library and had softly closed the door, the girl slipped forward and found another place of concealment from which she could watch the door.

Ann Kyley went slowly around all of the walls of the library. She shivered as she saw the now blackened blot on the ebony table. She almost imagined she could see Lun Woo's stiff body seated in the chair.

The girl took down each row of books separately, then piled then on the floor. But even her untrained perception informed her there was only a solid wall behind then.

She then turned to an examination of the floor from which the big Oriental rug had vanished. She started at the fireplace, where a log was burning, and worked her way across, examining each crack of the closely fitted and polished boards.

The girl was almost in the middle of the big room when she thought she heard a soft footfall or something scraping. She raised her head and listened intently, eyes moving to take in every corner. The sound was not renewed, and she thought she must have imagined it.

She again bent to that slow inspection of each crack in the floor. There was neither a scraping sound nor a footstep but powerful, throttling hands seemed to come out of space and encircle her soft throat. The fingers closed with such gripping force that the girl emitted no sound whatever.

Ann Kyley did not know how or when consciousness left her.

THERE was a throbbing ache in her throat and small spots floating before her eyes when she opened them slowly. An attempt to move only rasped her wrists and ankles on tight cords. Breathing was made difficult by tape over her mouth which partly closed her nostrils.

She could turn only her head, which she did cautiously. If the tape had not been over her mouth, she would have screamed. For she discovered she was lying between four walls of a rough, unpainted shack. The crude shack had no windows, and the only light came from a small oil lamp.

But it had not been the fact that she apparently was in an isolated shack that would have brought the scream. The substance on which Ann Kyley was lying was as soft as most beds. Deep and thick. Her burning eyes instantly identified the pattern, for it

was the great rug that had been removed so mysteriously from the library.

Two huge vases of the ancient Ming design and two rare pictures were over by one wall. Ann Kyley then knew she was in the hands of the murderers of Lun Woo.

Yet, the first man she saw was proof he had not been prepared for her visit. The man was short and thick, and gruff of voice. He was wearing a hastily improvised handkerchief mask.

"Keep quiet and no harm will come to you, Miss Kyley," the man said, with calm assurance. "This is not a kidnapping. We have only the need to be sure a message will be properly conveyed, and you will be released. The boss will talk with you."

Ann Kyley could not speak. She watched intently, hoping she might in some manner see the one called the boss and mark some point for identification. In this she was to be disappointed.

The masked man slapped adhesive tape tightly over her eyes.

"It will be just as well," he said, "if you make up your mind to listen, and then obey."

The girl had been listening intently, hoping she might catch some vague sound outside the shack that later might serve as a means of locating the place. But there was only a brooding silence, disturbed softly by the low cooing of doves somewhere in the trees nearby.

She now heard a man speaking, as if he were talking with someone over the telephone. Then the speaker made his words directly for Ann Kyley's ears.

The girl's body was tense, then chilled with fear as she listened. The calmness with which the words were uttered only made them the more horrible to the sensitive Ann Kyley. She would not have believed anyone existed who could have uttered such a threat; if it had not been for the murder of Lun Woo and the gardener, Jimson.

She recalled these, and she had no doubt but that the speaker meant that what he was saying would be done. The girl could make no protest, no sound. Now she could not see.

The telephone conversation ceased, and a man came and stood beside her. His voice was still gruff, and she fancied he was attempting to muffle his true tones.

"You will tell just that, and no more," he said. "You understand the penalty if you disobey. If you agree, nod your head. At any time you may feel safe and inclined to break your word, let me inform you there is never a moment in that house that every word uttered isn't heard and reported. If you fail, you will never see your father again."

Ann Kyley could feel the soft body of the Oriental rug under her form. From this seemed to emanate some evil force—some murder magic woven into its beauty by the hands of those long dead.

Sheer terror caused Ann Kyley to nod her head slowly.

"That is good," said the voice. "We have studied you. We know you are a young woman of the character to keep her word."

A damp cloth was laid gently over the girl's face. The faint cooing of the doves somewhere outside faded from her hearing.

WHILE this subjugation of Judge Kyley's daughter was taking place, Wildcat Gordon and the police guards were making every attempt to extract some information from a dying woman. The maid who had been concealed outside the library door was found lying on the floor of the hallway.

Wildcat grunted oaths and ordered other servants kept from the hallway. He had the maid's head on one of his knees, striving to keep alive a faint spark of life. The woman's neck had been broken. Deeply etched bruises proved this had been accomplished by human hands—hands with the crushing strength of iron claws.

One nerve remained functioning, and Wildcat was aware the slightest movement would sever the tiny gray thread on which the woman's life and partial consciousness hung. The dying woman opened her eyes, and her lips moved.

"Tell us quickly what happened," said Wildcat.

The woman could find but few whispered words.

"In there—the miss—I watched—he came—it was—"

The slender nerve thread must have snapped. The woman was dead instantly. Wildcat already had some of the sheriff's deputies in the big library. Some books had been put on the floor and not replaced; but a quick examination proved this might have been done by Ann Kyley.

Wildcat drew Sheriff Callahan to one side before he telephoned the city for Judge Kyley.

"You heard what the dying maid said, Cal?"

"I couldn't miss the words, even if I ain't a smart city cop," drawled Sheriff Callahan. "She said, 'He came—it was—' So she was about to name the one who killed her. That means—"

"It's someone all of us must know?" finished Wildcat. "But I'd take an oath myself it's none of the servants. Yet, with the exception of myself and the county police, there has been no other person in the house."

"I'm gettin' at the bottom of this," growled Sheriff Callahan, "if I have to tear this house to pieces!"

Telephoning Judge Patrick Kyley the latest news was one of the most unpleasant assignments Wildcat Gordon ever had.

CHAPTER VII
THE GIRL WON'T TALK

WHILE County policemen again surged from the basement to the attic of the grisly mansion, making a futile search for the missing Ann Kyley, Wildcat Gordon was giving the case only deep thought.

The maid had been killed outside the big door of the library. This meant that someone had found it necessary to either enter or leave the murder room, and the watchful maid had then been in the way.

This eliminated the theory that some magic existed whereby the library could be entered by other means than the door or windows. Yet there had been every evidence the library door had not been unlocked at the time Lun Woo's body had been returned to the room.

The word got out quickly that Ann Kyley was missing. The spread of this through Ponto Hills aroused many angry neighbors. Dundas was the first to arrive, bringing half a dozen of his men-servants, and requesting Sheriff Callahan to make them deputies.

"We're jolly well none of us safe in our beds, old fellow," Dundas puffed to Wildcat Gordon. "I have only my sister, but I rather imagine she will be for giving up our place if Miss Kyley isn't found quickly."

No greater posse had ever been assembled in the hills than the band of grim-faced residents with their staffs of servants. All were quickly deputized by Sheriff Callahan, and then started beating all the woods and thickets around for several miles, like the movements of a rabbit drive.

Yet when darkness cane, and with it the night train from the city, not a single clue as to the possible whereabouts of Ann Kyley had been discovered.

Wildcat Gordon was swearing under his breath as he was forced to meet the automobile bearing Judge Kyley, and with no word of encouragement to hand out.

JEFFREY slid the big sedan into the driveway at high speed. He had been forced to take the larger car because of the smashed station wagon. Wildcat swore even more bitterly to himself when he saw Judge Patrick Kyley.

The fighting judge had never been daunted by personal threats. There had been times when his own life had been at stake in the uttering of sentences, yet he never had pulled the punch from his court bench.

But tonight even the normal redness had gone out of his face, and his shoulders sagged as he got to the ground. Dundas whistled softly beside Wildcat.

"The old fellow's just about done in," he stated. "I'll send some of my own help over, if they're needed. The blooming help here look as if all were about to pack up their belongings."

Dundas spoke the truth. Wildcat Gordon had had some difficulty persuading the remaining servants to stay. He had finally issued a flat edict, through the sheriff, that anyone leaving would be promptly arrested.

Judge Kyley leaned heavily on Wildcat's arm, his voice shaky, the first time Wildcat had ever heard it so.

"So, you've heard nothing, nothing, Wildcat? What am I going to do? You don't know what Ann means to me. Why, that girl is the salt of the earth. Now, she has to be sacrificed for a rat who should have been removed from society years ago!"

"I agree with that, Patrick. But you'll have to keep your chin up, and I'll tell you this: I don't believe it has the slightest connection with the Joe Baggio case, and I'm convinced Ann will be found unharmed."

Judge Kyley shook his head slowly, tears welling to his eyes.

"Unharmed! Unharmed, Wildcat? Maybe alive, maybe! But there are so many ways those rats can find to get what they want!"

"That's why I think Ann is all right thus far," stated Wildcat. "This is meant to bring pressure on you, so it can't be done by harming your daughter before word is brought to you. I want you to promise you will let me know instantly when a contact is made. And it will be."

DUNDAS proved a most sympathetic neighbor. He accompanied Wildcat with Judge Kyley upstairs. The judge convinced them he must at least see the locked library, though men attempted to persuade him this was useless. They were sure it would only add to the burden of his great grief.

Judge Kyley himself unlocked the big library door. He started to enter like a man whose feet have been weighted with lead, and then a great shout burst from his throat. He sprang forward so hastily, he almost fell on the polished floor where the rug had been.

"Ann! Ann, honey! Oh, my—"

Wildcat's steel-like hands caught the judge and steadied him. But Wildcat himself was very sick. The neighbor, Dundas, stood in the doorway, his breath wheezing noisily as if he could not find words to utter.

Judge Kyley believed he was looking at the body of his daughter, sitting stiffly upright in a chair. Sitting there as Lun Woo had been seated, the pallor of death on her lovely face. Blackened marks on the soft throat showed where brutal fingers had gripped the girl's neck.

Judge Kyley dropped on his knees before the rigid figure of the girl. Often the judge had excoriated those who entered his court to arouse maudlin sympathy for killers. He had scathingly referred them to the living victims of murder, and advised them to take their sympathy there.

But for the first time, Judge Patrick Kyley really understood the pangs of those who look upon loved ones who have died by violence. He stayed on his knees, mumbling, until Wildcat Gordon shouted.

Wildcat had at first believed as the judge, that Ann Kyley had come back as another terrible corpse to add to the array of murder victims. Then he had seen the slight throbbing of the pulse in the girl's throat.

FIVE minutes after Ann Kyley had been unbound and restoratives applied, the girl opened her eyes. She looked at her father, her lips barely moving.

"You are all right—all right?" she was saying.

"Yes, yes, Ann, honey! But what happened?" said Judge Kyley.

The girl's expression did not change. Yet it could be seen her eyes took on a suddenly deep, furtive expression. She was glancing from her father to Wildcat and Dundas.

"I don't know! Oh, I don't know! But we must go away, go away at once! We can't stay another hour in this terrible house!"

As she announced it, then, Ann Kyley persisted she knew nothing of what had happened; but Wildcat Gordon read the note of desperate fear in her voice. Ann Kyley, with her remarkable nerve, was plainly in a panic, and Wildcat read between her words.

He believed Ann Kyley knew much more than she was telling. He put a few questions.

"Where were you taken, and how?" he demanded.

"I don't know," reiterated the girl. "That is all. I just don't know!"

Ann Kyley was not aware that any good psychologist would have been sure she was holding back something for a purpose. Wildcat Gordon never posed as a psychologist, but he could read enough to know the girl was in sheer terror. She continued her plea that her father must leave this house at once.

Wildcat ceased his attempt to get the truth from Ann Kyley. He had been close, his hands moving unobserved by the others. Now he was palming half a dozen fuzzy, bright strands or threads that had been clinging to the girl's dress. These were on her back between the shoulders.

Wildcat knew little of art, but he identified the weave of a rug. There was a small rug in a corner of the library that Judge Kyley had said matched the stolen Oriental. Wildcat quickly matched the threads.

He had seen another such rug in the curio room. Could it have been possible that Ann Kyley had been in the curio room while the remainder of the house was being searched? Wildcat carried the threads downstairs.

Because he did not wish to be observed, Wildcat failed to switch on the lights. He had decided to take the rug from the curio room to his own bedroom for closer examination before he informed Sheriff Callahan of his theory.

Wildcat remembered exactly where the little rug had been lying, close to the teakwood table in the middle of the room. He walked over in the darkness, bending to touch the rug, but his fingers encountered only polished floor.

Wildcat bent lower, touching what might have been the edge of the rug under the table. He was beginning to pull this out, when he stiffened and remained still.

A warm drop of something had fallen on the back of his neck. A second drop touched his skin. The fluid was warm, and it was trickling slowly from the top of the teakwood table. Wildcat slid out and backed away, his eyes seeking the tabletop.

Yes, there was something there. It looked like a long bundle in the darkness, there being just light enough to show its outlines. Wildcat moved with swift tread to the light button.

Wildcat had been evolving a careful theory, which could only have one answer. The reason the county authorities had been baffled was that none of the stolen objects had been removed from the mansion. Regardless of the failure to discover any possible hiding place, Wildcat had come to believe this thoroughly.

Therefore, nothing could have been brought in. But something had been brought in—a horrible something.

A MAN'S bound body lay on the table. He was dead, undoubtedly, for a curved Oriental saber with a jeweled hilt had been thrust sidewise through his throat. It had been left sticking there, and the man had been killed within the past few minutes.

The blood was still slowly oozing, trickling off the edge of the table. Wildcat shivered and rubbed the back of his neck.

There it was before him, and most incredible of the crimes as yet. For this man had come from the outside. He was Arthur Watson, the missing witness in the Joe Baggio case, and there was no doubt that he had been alive when he had been brought into the curio room.

Five long minutes Wildcat Gordon stood there, attempting to visualize every incident since the arrival of Judge Kyley from the station, trying to fix the location of each person connected with the establishment.

Every minute of the time the house had been surrounded, not only by the State and county police, but by the hundreds of people from the hills who had been combing the thickets in the hope of finding Ann Kyley.

There was a look of horror on Arthur Watson's dead face, as if the point of the Oriental rapier had been pushed slowly into his throat. Besides being bound, the man's mouth had been tightly taped.

With police and others just outside that room, he had been torturously killed without being able to utter a sound. A minute later, Wildcat knew the body must have come through the door.

CHAPTER VIII
THE KIDNAPPING OF ANN

SHORTLY after the finding of Arthur Watson's body in the curio room, Judge Kyley swore to Wildcat Gordon and his neighbor, Dundas.

"I want to please my daughter, and she must go away, but this involves my honor! I shall not leave this mansion until Joe Baggio is apprehended and put away for good! No one can ever drive me out!"

When Ann Kyley learned of her father's decision, the girl was white-faced. Because of the shock she had received, she was kept uninformed of the latest gruesome discovery.

"You must get away, you must!" she almost screamed at her father. "Oh, you don't know! You don't know!"

"That's right, Ann," stated Wildcat. "We don't know, but there is something you aren't telling. Now where did you see the Oriental rug stolen from the library?"

Am Kyley's eyes widened as she stared at him. The surprise almost compelled words, but she forced them back with teeth clenched in her lower lip.

Then she said: "I didn't see it! I didn't! You are trying to keep my father here! They'll kill him—they'll—"

The once calm Ann Kyley sobbed incoherently.

"That will be all for now," said Wildcat. "Wherever they've cached the loot from this house is the place you were taken, Miss Kyley. Now, we have decided you must get away from here for a while."

Ann Kyley flatly refused to be persuaded to leave the mansion unless Judge Kyley would accompany her.

In the meantime, the police guards were conducting one more search of the house and grounds. Sheriff Callahan's rugged face was as set as a granite mask. Members of the neighborhood posses had learned of the new murder.

Some were hurrying to their own homes. Others were about the grounds of the estate, their faces grimly backing up threats to enact summary justice if they could lay hands on the criminals responsible for these outrages.

WILDCAT GORDON had a brief conversation with the county medical examiner. Obtaining Judge Kyley's agreement, Wildcat sent the physician to Ann Kyley's room. On the pretext he was administering a sedative, the medical examiner induced the girl to swallow a tablet.

Ten minutes later, he announced to Wildcat she would sleep for at least six or eight hours.

"It's the only way," Wildcat told Judge Kyley. "She will wake up in the city where she'll be safe, and where it will be impossible for her to return."

Big Jeffrey, the chauffeur, growled a protest when he learned what was to be done. The hulking fellow appeared to have taken a great liking to Ann Kyley. He became more subdued when Judge Kyley explained it was necessary for the girl's protection.

Jeffrey immediately gathered blankets and said he would prepare the sedan in such a way none outside or inside would know Ann Kyley was leaving. Jeffrey went down the inside house stairs leading to the basement garage.

He had been gone less than a minute, and Wildcat was wrapping the girl in another blanket and preparing to take her to the car, when Jeffrey burst furiously through the door.

"Somebody got at the big car, Judge!" he announced. "Took a wrench and jammed the generator! She won't turn over! It's been done in the last few minutes!"

Jeffrey was explaining the sedan could not be repaired without sending away the broken generator. Wildcat Gordon slipped away. He had the light figure of Ann Kyley in his arms as he eluded the others and got to the garage downstairs.

Less than a minute was required to confirm Jeffrey's story. A quick but expert job of putting the sedan out of commission had been accomplished. Which meant, in spite of their secrecy about the removal of Ann Kyley, someone inside that house knew she was to be taken away.

And, it seemed, that someone was determined to prevent the girl from leaving. Someone who no doubt was counting upon the terror of Ann Kyley to drive her father from the place. Yet Wildcat Gordon suddenly decided there had been some other reason for crippling the big sedan.

For, besides the wrecked station wagon, there were two other smaller cars. Wildcat placed the unconscious Ann Kyley in the seat of one of these, moving her so she could not be seen from the outside.

When he stepped on the starter, the motor responded instantly. Wildcat circled the big sedan and drove from the garage. He was out of the grounds before Judge Kyley or the others discovered

the quick action he had taken.

Some twenty minutes later, Wildcat was telephoning Sheriff Callahan, who was still at Judge Kyley's mansion. Without revealing his identity to others, Wildcat requested the sheriff to be at his jail within the next half hour.

When Sheriff Callahan met Wildcat outside the jail, Wildcat calmly announced, "I've got a prisoner for you, Cal."

A moment later, the sleeping Ann Kyley had been carried in.

"Great gosh, Wildcat!" exploded Sheriff Callahan. "I can't do anything like that! You mean lock up the judge's daughter?"

"Unless you can think of some safer place until this blows over," said Wildcat.

"Thunderation, Wildcat! You think of the damnedest ideas!

WILDCAT'S bizarre disposal of Ann Kyley for her own safety was accomplished with such dispatch that the fast-moving commissioner was back in Judge Kyley's mansion within an hour. Wildcat ran the small car into the basement garage.

Big Jeffrey was working on the generator of the sedan. The chauffeur bodyguard made no secret of a sudden dislike for Wildcat Gordon. He stepped almost out of his province of servant.

"It ain't right noways!" he growled. "Judge Kyley is all torn up, an' Miss Ann should've stayed here! That's what I'm bein' paid for, lookin' out for 'em!"

Wildcat grinned a little.

"You get upstairs and inform Judge Kyley that Miss Ann is now in a safe place," he directed. "You haven't done such a good job looking out for then thus far."

Jeffrey left the garage, muttering under his breath. Wildcat observed the extra length of his arms, the ponderous, muscled hands. The man was somewhat like an ox. Wildcat thought of the broken neck of the maid, the last to die.

He recalled that Jeffrey had been about immediately after the murder. His mind flashed back to the removal of the pictures from Ann Kyley's room and the strange disappearance of the girl for several hours, then her return.

The summation made it apparent that the actions of Jeffrey would bear close scrutiny. Wildcat walked around the disabled sedan. Why should that car have been picked at the moment Ann Kyley was to be taken away, and two other small cars left intact?

Wildcat had made a close examination of the bound body of the murdered Arthur Watson. Details remained with him. A button and a piece of cloth had been torn from the dead man's coat, seemingly in a struggle when he had been abducted.

Wildcat was standing beside the big trunk compartment of the sedan. A bit of light cloth came under his gaze, protruding from underneath the closed lid of the trunk. The compartment was locked, but a curved bit of steel picked the fastening open.

There had been some dust in the compartment. Wildcat's flashlight showed that it had been newly disturbed. Some heavy object had been in that trunk. As the lid raised, a bit of cloth and a button fell to the garage floor.

WILDCAT knew as he picked it up that it was the missing button from the murdered man's gray suit. Jeffrey had driven this car down the hill to the station to meet Judge Kyley on the night train. There had been more than half an hour of time during which Jeffrey had been alone in the sedan.

Could Judge Patrick Kyley have been brought home, riding in a car that carried a missing witness from his own court? The devilish ingenuity of the scheme to strike at the judge's nerve, at a time when his daughter had been missing, showed an extraordinary brain.

Jeffrey had been driving that car. Wildcat swiftly judged that the bulky chauffeur did not possess the brain capacity to figure out such a clever plan as putting a murdered witness in the judge's own home. Yet it was plain enough the chauffeur must have helped carry out the scheme.

While others were up in the library with the returned Ann Kyley, Jeffrey had ample opportunity to have brought Arthur Watson from the basement garage and thrust a saber through his throat in the curio room.

Wildcat slipped the button and cloth into a pocket, then closed the compartment of the sedan. He heard Jeffrey clumping back down the stairs still muttering over Ann Kyley being taken away. Wildcat glided outside, saying nothing.

He was debating whether to clamp down on Jeffrey and force a confession, or to keep him under surveillance in the hope of making direct contact with the brain behind the mystery.

DUNDAS, the puffing Englishman, was just going to his limousine where his chauffeur, Perkins, had been sitting as motionless as a wooden Indian for several hours. Dundas saw Wildcat and turned aside.

"It's a jolly good thing, Commissioner Gordon, you removed Miss Kyley from possible further harm," said Dundas. "You know, old fellow, I've been scouting around a bit, and—well! confound it, I have a theory!"

"Yes," said Wildcat. "What do you think, Dundas?"

Dundas came close and spoke in a low tone, as if he feared his words might be heard.

"Miss Kyley undoubtedly was afraid someone very close to her might be hearing all she had to say when she was brought back. I have been doing some checking. It seems bloody strange, but Judge Kyley's chauffeur, Jeffrey, was somewhere around every time something happened."

While this confirmed what Wildcat had discovered, he only nodded and said: "That will bear looking into. I'll take it up with Sheriff Callahan when he gets back. He was called away while I was gone."

Dundas added a further word.

"You know, old fellow, when we found Miss Kyley sitting in the library, I happened to see Jeffrey stop in the hallway, watching us."

Wildcat guessed it must have been almost that time that the murder of Arthur Watson was accomplished. Jeffrey could have brought the man to the curio room, stabbed him, then gone quickly into the upper hallway.

Wildcat went upstairs to call the inn at the foot of the hills.

CHAPTER IX
THE CURIOSITY OF TINY

THE oldish man who registered at the inn at the foot of Ponto Hills was bald-headed, except for tufts of gray hair over his ears. Bushy eyebrows gave his faded eyes the effect of being sunk deep in their sockets, and he peered nearsightedly at everyone.

He was Dick Traeger, retired police deputy, known for years as Quick Trigger. When he drove up and entered the lobby of the roadhouse inn, he was carrying an old-fashioned suitcase. This was very dilapidated and had small, gaping holes.

The clerk took in the seedy appearance of the new arrival and languidly shoved a register toward him. Quick Trigger scrawled a name.

The clerk grinned sneeringly, and said: "Brian Boru, huh? I suppose you would be one of the Brian Borus that was kings or something?"

"Reckon that's right," drawled Quick Trigger. "The Brian Borus always was kings."

At the mention of the name, there was a faint whine and a clawing inside the old suitcase. The clerk looked at Quick Trigger suspiciously.

"You wouldn't be wantin' a room with bath?" he said, scornfully.

The clerk got a surprise. Quick Trigger slapped a hundred-dollar bill on the desk.

"I'll take a suite, the best you've got," he grinned.

The clerk tested the bill, and Quick Trigger was sent up to a suite. When the old suitcase was opened, a Scottish terrier, black as midnight, started an inspection of the rooms.

Quick Trigger had registered the dog and not himself. This was according to Wildcat's instructions. Too many persons of the underworld were still familiar with Quick Trigger and his reputation.

Old Quick Trigger would not have been so amused at the ruse of registering himself under the name of the Scottish terrier, if he had been watching his windshield mirror more closely when he arrived at the inn.

There had been little traffic on the road. One small coupé had been sticking on the trail of Quick Trigger's car all the way from the city.

When Quick Trigger drove into the parking lot at the inn, the coupé slid under some trees out on the highway, and a diminutive figure emerged from the driver's seat. Her own headlights showed her to be a girl of doll-like size, with clustering, black curls and blue eyes that glinted as if they contained dancing devils.

"And he thought I wouldn't know he was up to something," murmured the girl, as she watched Quick Trigger enter the inn. "Where in the world did he get that old suitcase? He didn't have it when he left home."

THE girl was Tiny Traeger. Wildcat's mysterious phone call had aroused her curiosity. Her grandfather's lack of explanation had caused her to make up her mind to discover what might be going on. The mysterious night absences of Wildcat Gordon and Quick Trigger had aroused her resentfulness many times.

Tonight she intended to find out what it was all about.

Tiny Traeger remained hidden for several minutes. Then she walked boldly to the entrance of the inn and into the lobby. At the moment, the clerk's back was turned. Tiny started to cross the lobby, nonchalantly powdering her nose.

Then she heard a voice at the top of the first flight of stairs. It was the querulous tone of old Quick Trigger. He was clumping onto the first of the steps coming down. Tiny caught her breath.

She could imagine what her grandfather would say if he found out she had followed him. Tiny glanced wildly about for a hiding place.

The broad door of a taproom stood open. The interior glittered invitingly, and across from the long bar Tiny could see a row of green curtained booths. The open space before the bar was empty at the moment, and Tiny was in one of the curtained booths when Quick Trigger reached the lobby of the inn.

In the taproom, Tiny had another lucky break. The bartender's back was turned and he did not see her enter the booth. Tiny relaxed and waited. She heard her grandfather talking with the clerk.

Then she caught the murmur of voices in the booth adjoining her own.

Perhaps Tiny would not have deliberately eavesdropped on the conversation, only two low words caused every part of her young body to grow tense.

"Wildcat Gordon—"

She could distinguish three different voices. The name of Wildcat set Tiny's heart fluttering in more ways than one. She crouched in a corner, applying one small ear to the thin wall of the booth.

"It couldn't be better," murmured a voice. "He would mess into something outside, and it makes it sweet for the toss down in the city if Wildcat Gordon fails to get back to his job."

"O.K.," said another voice. "But he's dynamite, and unless the boss has got a sure thing this time, I don't want any part of it!"

"The boss will take care of that," said another voice, with sneering emphasis. "Everything's clicked this far, except them mugs letting Wildcat put the bee on them when they grabbed him. He won't get a second chance like that!"

Another man said it was time they were moving. He said something about the "big red barn." Tiny slid over on the seat and peeped through the curtains. If she had expected to see three men wearing the marks of gangsters, she was disappointed.

The three men who came from the adjoining booth were neatly dressed and sleekly groomed. One wore a small mustache, and they might have been youthful businessmen out for a ride in the hills. Only Tiny could see there was an ironical slant to their mouths, and they had a habit of glancing quickly over their shoulders.

When they came from the booth, the three saw there was no other person in the taproom.

"Maybe see you later tonight, Jim," said one of the men to the bartender. "I'll take along a flask."

"Up to the Society Casino, huh?" grunted the bartender. "Well, they tell me they're putting on high play."

"Anytime you feel like dropping a few hundred, come along up," laughed one of the men, as they went out.

Tiny held the booth curtain shut. A Society Casino. Well, Tiny had heard Wildcat and Quick Trigger talking about these "floating games" out in the hills. And these three men were going to see the boss about something that boded ill for Wildcat Gordon.

"TINY" TRAEGER

TINY opened her handbag. In ten seconds her perfect, childlike face was heavily rouged. Lipstick reddened her mouth, made it much too red. Tiny pulled her small hat definitely over one eye.

She glanced into the lobby and saw the three men crossing to the door. Quick Trigger must have gone back upstairs.

The bartender glanced up with a startled expression when he heard a hard, little voice say, "Gimme one of them flasks, brother."

He saw a small girl with a drawn, pouting mouth and a hat pulled over one blue eye. In size, she was little more than a child, but the bartender had seen too many of her type to make any mistake about the painted face.

"Huh?" he grunted. "O.K., sister. But you're new out around here, ain't cha?"

Tiny planted a bill on the bar and said: "Cut out the conversation! I've got a date!"

The bartender slanted his eyes over the perfect, childlike figure, and said: "I don't often go for 'em, but you can have another date anytime."

"Skip it!" snapped Tiny, and imagined she made it sound very tough indeed.

The bartender slid a flask of liquor across the bar. Tiny put it in her handbag, and a surprised clerk saw her slip across the lobby and out into the night. He had not seen her enter.

The moon was shining, and Tiny kept close to the building in the shadows. She could hear the voices of the three men as a big car started out the driveway toward the highway.

Tiny got her feet wet in the dew and tore her dress climbing over a fence, but the red light of the other car was still in view when she got her coupé going.

Wildcat would have been furious and old Quick Trigger would have had heart failure, if they could have known about Tiny during the following half hour.

Tiny drove without even dashboard lights, taking long chances on finding the curves of the climbing road by moonlight. The taillight of the leading car helped her and several times prevented her coupé from flipping off the narrow road into which the three men had turned a mile or so from the inn.

This road became a succession of winding curves. The big car ahead was fast, and Tiny's smaller car rocked and swayed dangerously. Both cars had

gone several miles into Ponto Hills when Tiny saw the red taillight ahead vanish at an angle. When she reached that spot, there was a narrow lane, hardly to be noticed.

Tiny judged this must be the secret road to the Society Casino, the red barn, of which she had heard the men speak. She picked up the taillight of the car ahead again.

The bigger car was forced to less speed, and Tiny judged they must be nearing the red barn, whatever that might be. Wildcat Gordon undoubtedly would have given her a long promised spanking had he witnessed the amazing actions of the childlike Tiny in the next few minutes.

TINY was trailing the other car at less than a hundred yards when she suddenly flashed on her headlights. She took the flask of liquor from her handbag and had a long swallow before she caught her breath. Choking and gasping, she poured most of the liquor in the flask out into the road, then dropped the flask on the seat.

The flashing on of her headlights had brought instant reaction in the big car ahead. Tiny saw that it had braked to a stop. Some of the liquor was spilled on her dress, but her smile radiated on the heavily rouged face.

"Too bad, little car," she murmured, slipping from under the steering wheel.

As she went out the side door of the car, she deliberately turned the steering wheel and headed it for the nearest tree across a ditch. Tiny flopped into the bottom of the ditch as the coupé crashed, splintering glass and metal.

The three men from the car ahead were shouting and running back along the road.

"Keep your eye open, Buck!" cautioned one man. "You can't tell what kind of a trick might be pulled up here."

So, two of the men thumbed automatics from their neat clothes and slowed warily as they approached the wrecked coupé. Tiny could dimly see their faces in the moonlight; she groaned dismally and got unsteadily to her feet.

"Oh! Oh, my car!" she moaned drunkenly. "My bu'ful car."

The flame of a cigarette lighter struck her eyes. She heard one of the men let out an oath.

"Just a dizzy dame! Well, sister, where'd you collect the jag, an' what're you doin' up here in the sticks!"

Tiny leered at him with her red mouth, and one eye showed under a now disreputable hat. A tear in her dress revealed a perfect white shoulder. One of the men uttered a low oath of appreciation.

"Just another fluff," he laughed. "But tell me, what're you doin' so far off your beat?"

Another man had found the flask in the seat of the coupé. The little car was smashed beyond quick repair.

"Oh!" moaned Tiny. "Was goin' to that S'ciety Casino, an' somethin' pushed a tree at me across the ditch. My boyfrien' sent me up to make a play, an' now he'll be sore as the devil 'cause I didn't make it."

THE three sleek men had an eye for beauty, even when it had been mixed up with a car wreck and too many drinks. They were quick enough to appreciate the possibilities of Tiny, and she was a new "fluff," as they viewed it.

There was no doubt but the little dame had accumulated considerable of a jag. One man winked at the others. Tiny wasn't bad-looking, not at all.

"Still want to go on to the Casino sister?"

"Sure 'nough! But I can't walk," announced Tiny. "My boyfrien' gimme some dough an' some numbers, an—"

Tiny fumbled and dropped her handbag. A neat roll of bills fell out. The one on the outside was a century. Understanding flickered in the eyes of the three men.

"Guess we can't leave a nice little girl standing out in the woods," said one. "You can come along with us, if you behave yourself. But you've got to lay off that giggle water if you expect to read any numbers."

Tiny's acting was perfect. She caught up her nearly empty flask, drained its last few drops and sent it crashing into a tree.

"Sure!" she announced, solemnly. "That's my last one tonight."

CHAPTER X
"IT'S THE WHISPERER!"

THE big red barn on the crooked lane in the hills had originally been built for the housing of livestock. It was equipped with many spacious stalls and a central floor for feeding.

The exterior was dilapidated and much of the red paint had faded. But unchinked cracks showed brilliant light inside. The big stalls that had once housed cattle were still in place, but they now housed a different brand of cattle.

Each stall was a booth showing some form of game whereby the patrons of the place could be separated quickly and painlessly from their fat roll of bills. The middle feeding floor was still a feeding floor, but it was now occupied by numerous well-dressed suckers who were engaged in feeding a "kitty" rather than lowly stock.

More than two hundred customers had, by the magic of being on the "inside," managed to find their way to this isolated red barn. They knew it as

the Society Casino. Tonight it was in the red barn. Perhaps next week it would be in what once had been some farmer's root cellar, or again in one of the more pretentious mansions.

The Society Casino was one of the "floating games." Because it "floated" from place to place, the gamblers eluded those of the law who might be honest enough to clamp on the lid. Perhaps a few of those whose duty it was to enforce the law knew each move that was made.

Besides the stalls, containing every game from dice to betting on number combinations, there were tables where refreshments and liquor were served at robbery prices. The patrons were of the brand of citizens seeking excitement, some with money to lose and some who could only hope to win.

Safely away from a main highway, the patrons were noisy and hilarious. An inconspicuous figure in gray clothes, with an oddly pointed chin and a long upper lip was seriously and quietly engaged in piling chips in front of him at a dice or crap table in one of the stalls.

The man had blurred, whitish hair and wore a hat with a round brim. He was so much like any of several thousand who might be found in any city that none paid special attention to him.

Even his winnings failed to excite interest, for he adroitly concealed chips and kept his stack at a small level. But under the round-brimmed hat, his almost colorless eyes were cold and acutely observing. They were like the eyes of Texas, some would say, killer eyes.

For this quiet, unassuming man in gray was The Whisperer.

LESS than an hour after Ann Kyley had been safely housed in Sheriff Callahan's jail, Wildcat Gordon had been tipped off by the sheriff to the Society Casino he had learned was being put on in the red barn.

Wildcat had quickly communicated with the inn at the foot of the hills, calling a guest under the name of Brian Boru. Quick Trigger had got his message.

The Whisperer was an old hand at dice. It was an army game, and not to be forgotten, even by a police commissioner. His winnings were growing when a stoop-shouldered man entered, using a cane. None there would have identified Quick Trigger.

Since his retirement from the police, the ex-deputy had made a study of disguises. It was because of this he was responsible for the dental plates which changed the contour of Wildcat's face, even seemed to change his personality.

Wildcat apparently did not see Quick Trigger, but a look of understanding had flashed between them. Quick Trigger hobbled over and became interested in the roulette table. None saw that the old man's seemingly nearsighted eyes were studying every detail of the red barn's interior.

A tall man with a thin face, a diamond flashing on a finger of one hand, and giving the impressive manner of some impresario, moved about the big room. He was a polished fellow, and his small, sharp eyes missed none of the play at any of the games.

The Whisperer watched him closely. He was Court Jackson. And The Whisperer was here because he had decided that all of the mystery in the Judge Kyley mansion somehow centered around this smooth gambler who had never been forced to take a rap.

Play was high and the night still was early. The Whisperer pulled his stack of chips toward him and was about to arise, as if to cash in his winnings, when he suddenly settled back in his chair and accepted the dice.

He had caught a glimpse of a heavyset, slack-jawed man at a dice table in another stall. He had previously missed this man because of the crowd around his shoulder. For the heavy man's winning had attracted attention.

It was not the size of the winnings that had settled The Whisperer into his chair. He had been about to move across the room for closer communication with old Quick Trigger. Now his glance at Quick Trigger said: "No matter what happens, stay where you are until I give the word."

For the slack-jawed man with the big winnings at the crap table was none other than Detective Rantz of the city department. Rantz, who only the night before had told of being tricked by Joe Baggio and locked in a cell, while Joe Baggio removed his gun and bluffed his way to freedom.

The Whisperer saw that Detective Rantz was in high spirits in two ways. His face was flushed from his winnings and a bottle he had set conveniently at his elbow. The detective was becoming loud and boisterous.

Quick Trigger also identified Rantz, and thereupon became intent upon the play at the roulette table. Court Jackson approached the place where Detective Rantz was boastfully piling up his winnings.

The Whisperer saw Court Jackson's hand touch the detective on a shoulder He could see that Jackson said something to Rantz, then walked away.

The look on the detective's face was like that of a man who has just had some good news. He beamed at those around him, swept his chips to one side and started cashing in.

The Whisperer was intent on this when he saw the stooped figure of old Quick Trigger start from the roulette table as if he had been stung. Quick Trigger was looking at a group which had just entered the red barn. The Whisperer sucked in his own breath,

then swore silently.

Three hard, well-dressed men of the sleek variety were escorting a tiny girl toward a refreshment table. The girl's tinkling voice rang out in a laugh; then it took on a harsh note as she waved an expressive hand.

TINY TRAEGER, in spite of her reddened lips and drooping hat, was a sight to turn all eyes in her direction. She was like some beautiful, if over-painted doll, much out of place among all this polished toughness. Yet, she was displaying every symptom of being thoroughly at home.

She demanded a drink in a voice that carried over the murmur of the crowd, and the three men were elaborate in their attentions. Only by the quickest and the sharpest of signals was The Whisperer able to halt old Quick Trigger.

In another five seconds, the raging grandfather would have been laying three sleek fellows on the floor.

"Hold it!" said the Whisperer's lips. "I don't know what it means, but let it ride until we see what Rantz is up to!"

Quick Trigger's shoulders sagged lower as he went back to the roulette table. The Whisperer took a mental photograph of three hard faces. He would know those three sleek fellows again, anytime, any place. If the slightest harm came to Tiny, that trio with her had signed warrants for a very disagreeable future.

Tiny apparently had reached the giggling stage of a jag. The Whisperer kept from view, for while she did not know Wildcat was also The Whisperer, Tiny did know him in this character as a friend of Quick Trigger's, named "Dunk" Smith.

Tiny's hasty makeup for her rôle of a tough little egg was good enough, but her doll-like beauty kept turning heads in her direction, while The Whisperer's veins burned with anger and his hands clenched tightly.

But now he was watching Detective Rantz.

If Detective Rantz had been grieving over the escape of a prisoner, with his suspension and possible disgrace threatening, he was far from showing it. Court Jackson was talking to another man. This fellow arose, raised his hand for silence and made an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen! It gives me pleasure to announce the number of six-eight-ten as the totals winner of the numbers played today on the Tropical Park races! It pays off at six hundred to one, and now you can all get ready to give the winner a big hand! A Mr. Rantz is holding a thirty-dollar ticket!!'

An excited murmur grew to a roaring shout. Detective Rantz stepped forward, his flushed face beaming. He was waving a numbers ticket. A man was counting out centuries, and when hundred-dollar bills are stacked up to make eighteen thousand, it is an impressive pile.

"Here you are! Here you are!" rumbled Detective Rantz, picking up half a dozen centuries and tossing then out into the crowd.

It was a magnificent gesture. Unfortunately, Detective Rantz was playing directly into The Whisperer's hands with the ensuing scramble for the centuries on the floor.

THE WHISPERER had been adding up incidents. The high winnings of Detective Rantz at the crap table. Now this payoff on a numbers ticket to the tune of eighteen thousand dollars. To be sure, in the role of private citizen, Detective Rantz could play as many games and win as much as he liked.

You could not pin anything on an officer sworn to uphold the law in a wide-open payoff like the one that had just been witnessed. The Whisperer's odd dental plates clicked on his teeth. One hand was raised and snapped down. Old Quick Trigger hobbled away from the roulette table.

Even the screaming, hilarious Tiny had joined in the rush for the scattered hundred-dollar bills. She was frozen suddenly by a hissing voice that said peremptorily: "You get out of here and go home, or I'll break you in two!"

Tiny quieted her voice, her eyes searching for the origin of the hissed command. Then the lights went out.

There was the sudden hush of all voices, a silence into which cane an eerie, penetrating whisper.

"Stay where you are! Don't move or you'll die! Don't anyone touch the money on the tables!"

The crowd had begun surging, as if to find the exits, but all ceased to move. Court Jackson swore aloud, and his oath was cut off by a slapping blow that silenced his speech on a pained grunt.

Coins were clinking, as if being swept into a sack. There was a rustling of paper money.

Someone shouted: "It's The Whisperer! Do as he says! He'll kill!"

"It's The Whisperer!" went around in low-breathed exclamation.

CHAPTER XI
WHEN A RAT SQUEALS

THE lights in the Society Casino flashed on. They had been turned off less than half a minute. The eyes of a stupefied crowd of customers turned this way and that. In the confusion they sought and accused many persons, but all were wrong.

Old Quick Trigger was hobbling about on his cane. He had handled the lights, just as he had often done for The Whisperer. This duty was accomplished.

Now he was determined to get his hands on Tiny.

The gnarled fingers of the ex-deputy gripped his cane. He had an idea it might be well to use it upon his granddaughter, or possibly he had more in mind getting in a few solid whacks at the sleek men who had brought her here.

Tiny? How had such a thing happened? Tiny, drunk! Here in this place!

Old Quick Trigger could not see the girl. Two hundred guests of the red barn were milling about. Court Jackson, with a new bruise on his chin, was waving his hands and seeking to bring order.

"The Whisperer got the roulette money!" was the word passing around.

It could be seen that several thousand dollars had been swept from the middle table. The patrons were most concerned with finding their hats and a way out. Court Jackson was cool.

"Stay here!" he warned sharply. "The boys are ready to prevent anything more happening! Rush outside, and The Whisperer may be waiting to take all you've got!"

That was an idea. Nearly all lingered reluctantly, and Court Jackson attempted to start up play. But he was interrupted.

"That fellow Rantz, the numbers winner!" shouted a voice. "He isn't here!"

THE absence of Detective Rantz was immediately noted, where none would have thought of the quiet man in gray who had been too inconspicuous for even his dice winnings to attract attention.

Court Jackson hurriedly spoke to several of his game tenders. He walked over to a corner and said a few quick words to the three sleek men who had Tiny Traeger at the table among them.

"Drop that little dame and get to the place!" was Court Jackson's command. "Something's slipped! That big ape of a cop has maybe double-crossed us! He got his dough and faded, or else he was in on a frame-up! We've got to put a finish on this!"

Tiny was a smart girl. In the midst of this, she suddenly dropped her head to the table and sobbed. They were going to leave her here. She did not catch the swift glances between the three men.

The narrowed, furtive eyes were saying: "Perhaps there's something haywire about this fluff!"

One man caught hold of Tiny's right shoulder. He was the fellow with the wisp of a mustache.

"Listen, sweetie, you've got to get moving," he said. "We'll take you back to the highway and see that you get a ride into town."

Tiny Traeger put on a swell new act.

"Oh, please! I wanted to stay with you! Don't you like me a little bit? Just a little bit?"

She had this one sleek fellow. He had begun to like her more than a little bit. She was new in his experience, like a child. Not but that he believed she was like all the others who drank too much and had too much money. But what would be the harm taking her along?

Anyway, Court Jackson's order was not to be disregarded.

The three men arose and slid toward the door, with Tiny walking beside them. The patrons of the red barn were looking for the red-faced fellow who had won on the numbers ticket. But they did not find him.

DETECTIVE RANTZ was at this moment walking stiffly through the woods. The point of a pistol prodded his back. A whispering voice was all he could hear—a weird hissing that commanded him to keep his mouth closed or have his spine neatly divided.

The Whisperer was invisible in the shadows of the trees. Detective Rantz tried turning his head to glimpse the face of his captor, but the rasping knuckles of a fist jolted his chin to its forward position.

"Keep walking!" said the whispering voice. "And now I'll take that little stack of numbers winnings you've got in your pockets!"

Detective Rantz bellowed at that, wild oaths, and threats.

"You don't know who I am! When I get back, that'll be the end of your little game!"

"I know well enough who you are," said the eerie whisper. "Well enough to put you up like this!"

The Whisperer's terrible hands ripped into the detective's heavy jowls, snapping his head about as if it had been attached to a loose string. Detective Rantz made some show of resistance, but knuckles chopped furrows in his face, almost closing his eyes.

The Whisperer then pulled Detective Rantz toward a slender tree. The detective's own handcuffs snapped on his wrists. Then Rantz ceased roaring and started to plead for mercy.

His arms encircled the tree. He could not leave there without moving it.

But the detective did not betray frantic fear until he saw the dim, gray blur of The Whisperer facing him and the eerie voice promising that he intended making known to Wildcat Gordon where he could be found.

"I think you have some things to explain to your commissioner," said The Whisperer, with meaning.

"No! No!" howled Detective Rantz. "You wouldn't do that! You wouldn't turn me over to Wildcat! You want money! You're The Whisperer, and you go around robbing crooks. Let me go, and I'll put you next to the highest stakes ever piled

up! What you took tonight is nothing but chicken feed!"

The Whisperer stood in the shadow of the trees.

"You'll play with me, Rantz?" demanded the eerie voice. "What is this game you're talking about?"

"Turn me loose and I'll tell you!" groaned the detective. "I know when the game is up, and we can get ours out of this! What you saw in the red barn was only a little pay-off for a little job! But I'll let you in on something big—big, I tell you!"

THE WHISPERER was sick with disgust. This was one of the men of his department. As the police commissioner, this was the sort of thing he had to overcome if law and order were to prevail.

Not for one minute had his mind left Tiny Traeger back there in the red barn. He had now wasted more time than he had intended. He was preparing to attempt something The Whisperer seldom did. He was going to strike twice in the same place.

Heedless of the crooked detective's groaning protest, The Whisperer slapped a gag into his mouth and tightened it with the man's own belt. There in the darkness Detective Rantz could cool off for a few hours, hugging a tree.

They had arrived at this point by a twisted trail through the woods. It was hardly likely Rantz would be discovered by his crook friends. The Whisperer marked the place by the trees and glided back in the direction of the red barn.

His object was to get to Quick Trigger as quickly as possible and solve this inexplicable matter of Tiny.

CHAPTER XII
JOE BAGGIO'S MISTAKE

QUICK TRIGGER, about the time Wildcat Gordon started back for the Society Casino, was pushing through the panicky customers of the red barn seeking Tiny.

It was unfortunate for the ex-deputy that he was excited and was not checking on his personal appearance. His contact with others had caused the wig he wore with his disguise to slip off.

It was the bald-headed old Quick Trigger now forgetting to hobble along with his useless cane. A man close to Court Jackson punched the gambling boss in the ribs.

"Sa-ay! Look at that, Court! The old fellow! Dammit, I knew there was something screwy about all this! That's old Dick Traeger, the guy known as Quick Trigger, who plays along with Commissioner Wildcat Gordon!"

Quick Trigger did not know of this as he glimpsed the three sleek fellows with the apparently intoxicated Tiny passing out through a side door of the barn. One of the men—the one with the mustache—was holding Tiny by an arm and steadying her.

Quick Trigger uttered a guttural oath and jammed through the fringe of the crowd to reach the door. At a signal from Court Jackson, two heavily built dealers left their games and slipped through another door to the outside.

Tiny was being helped into a closed car, and one man already had the motor going when Quick Trigger started running and shouting. The mustached fellow was slamming the door of the car. Tiny did not hear Quick Trigger. The old ex-deputy failed to shout again.

Two big men rushed from the shadows, nipping Quick Trigger between them. The ex-deputy staggered with the crash of a fist in his face. He bellowed, and one hard, gaunt set of knuckles swept a man out of his path.

The second man poured rights and lefts upon Quick Trigger's bald head, with a force that drove him to his knees. The car containing Tiny glided toward the crooked lane that was the only road near the red barn.

Quick Trigger fumbled a heavy police revolver from under his clothes and the weapon jumped and blasted into the night. His assailant groaned and fell over him. Quick Trigger staggered to his feet and started running after the closed car.

THE gun blast had created new panic among the customers of the Society Casino. Under cover of this, Court Jackson got half a dozen of his men outside.

Quick Trigger judged quickly the abrupt curve of the lane and started down a steep grade to intercept the fleeing car.

Tiny neither saw nor heard any of the battle in the darkness, except the one explosion of her grandfather's revolver.

"Somebody's got The Whisperer!" said one of her companions. "We will go on to the place!"

Quick Trigger failed to head off the car. More men rushed down the grade upon him. One fellow drew a blackjack and threw it with terrific force. His aim was not so accurate, but the weighted weapon thudded between Quick Trigger's shoulders and jolted him off his feet.

Before he could arise, the battling ex-deputy was overpowered and hammered into insensibility by pounding fists, with perhaps a gun butt applied for good measure. Up by the red barn, Court Jackson was smoothly assuring his patrons that his men had got The Whisperer.

He went down the hill and returned, a smile of assurance on his thin face. He confirmed his own report. Now The Whisperer would be permanently

Heedless of the crooked detective's groaning protest, The Whisperer slapped a gag into his mouth and tightened it with the man's own belt.

removed by turning him over to the law, and the games could go on with some extra cash prizes for those who stayed.

Some customers took the opportunity to remove themselves from the hot spot. Some of the hardier gamblers remained and resumed play.

The Whisperer was gliding toward the red barn when he heard the shattering explosion of Quick Trigger's revolver. He knew a police gun when he heard it, an outright thunder as compared to the

usually snapping automatics of the mobsters.

Thickness of the bush impeded The Whisperer's movements, and when he again could see the Society Casino, all was quiet outside. Court Jackson had caused one wounded dealer to be removed. Tiny was gone in the car. Quick Trigger had not been returned to the red barn.

Less than three minutes was required for The Whisperer to ascertain that Tiny and Quick Trigger were not among the crowd still in the red barn. Court Jackson, likewise, had vanished from the scene. Lights of several cars were winding around the curves of the exit lane, going down the hill.

The Whisperer could only hope that Quick Trigger had succeeded in rescuing Tiny and had made a getaway. In that case, he would be waiting for The Whisperer in his rooms at the inn. The Whisperer was even more hopeful when he discovered the car in which Quick Trigger had arrived was missing.

He could gain the quickest information by returning directly to Judge Kyley's mansion and using the telephone.

BUT when The Whisperer was again Wildcat Gordon, he failed to get a telephone connection with old Quick Trigger. At this time, Quick Trigger returned to consciousness with painful effect and discovered he was sitting in a chair. His slowly opening eyes took in a poorly furnished set of three rooms with sagging slab doors.

The place might have been a cabin of some of the poorer natives of the hills. Quick Trigger found his hands were drawn behind him through the chair, and that a pair of handcuffs he always carried had been snapped on his wrists. Rope enwrapped his legs to the knees.

Quick Trigger could see. He could also hear, and he could have spoken. But his lips locked over suddenly clenched teeth. At this moment no man was in the room with him. Through a sagging door, he could see clearly a group in the adjoining room.

Rage-filled but grudging admiration brought a low groan to the ex-deputy's tongue. The doll-like Tiny Traeger was putting on a show of her own. A dozen other men had joined the three sleek companions of the blue-eyed girl.

Quick Trigger saw Tiny apparently empty a glass of red liquor. She sprang up and onto a rough, board table. Her dainty figure moved in the steps of a clever dance, while some of the men started keeping time with their hands.

Tiny had always been somewhat of an actress. Quick Trigger's raging consternation was now allayed. He had seen clearly what the admiring mobsters had not observed. Tiny had not swallowed that liquor. Her small hand had moved quickly, and the contents of the glass had been emptied underneath the table.

This informed Quick Trigger that at least his surprising grandchild was not as intoxicated as she seemed. Moreover, he knew she must have seen him brought into the cabin a prisoner. She had used her head to the extent of keeping to her rôle of a "good fellow."

Quick Trigger was right in that. Tiny had heard Court Jackson's instructions to his men. Thus far, she had learned no more of what trap might be in preparation for Wildcat Gordon. She had determined to discover this, no matter what the risk might be.

She had to cover the shock of old Quick Trigger's being carried in, and this she had done with hysterical laughter and a song that her grandfather would have been amazed to hear. Now she was carrying on until she could have the opportunity to get to Quick Trigger and set him free.

A TALL man appeared in the doorway of the third room of the cabin. His eyes glittered as he took in the picture of the dainty girl dancing on the table.

Court Jackson was not immune to the attractions of a pretty girl. The sudden smiling set of his mouth boded no good for Tiny Traeger

But at this moment, Court Jackson had other business. There had been the muttering of another man in the room behind him. Now Court Jackson flicked his thumb, summoning two of his men. As these men reached the door, their narrowed eyes asked a question of the boss.

Court Jackson nodded, the smile of appreciation for the appeal of Tiny dancing on the table never leaving his lips.

The three men went back into the room, Court Jackson closing the door. As they entered, a thick-lipped, scowling youth got up from a chair. He darted a glance at the faces of the other men.

"You said you'd get me out've the country, Court," the youth stated. "I know that old guy you brought in, and that means Wildcat Gordon will be right on your trail. If they grab me, they'll double the rap for the break."

"Sure," said Court Jackson, softly. "If they got you, they'd double the rap, Joe, maybe give you life or something. That's why we couldn't afford to have you caught."

The thick-lipped youth licked out with his tongue, and his look proved he had little nerve in such a situation. He swore desperately.

"Well, Court, get me out of the way!" he exclaimed. "I'd do anything to keep from going down the river! I can't stand being shut up! It drives me crazy! I lose my head!"

Court Jackson's two aides glanced at each other, and one pulled down a slow eyelid.

"That's it, Joe," said Court Jackson, without raising his voice. "If Judge Patrick Kyley ever got another crack at the Joe Baggio case, he'd find a way to double the limit. Yes, Joe, you'd do anything, in case he sent you down the river for keeps. You'd lose your head, and it would be worse when they pinned the killing of Arthur Watson on you."

Joe Baggio shouted: "No! No! I didn't bump him off! I never saw him after Rantz gimme his rod an' I walked out! It was swell of you, Court, to work the dick, and I won't forget it!"

Court Jackson said, gently: "They'd pin it on you, Joe, and you'd lose your head and talk. We knew you would talk if they put the rap on you, so that's why we brought you out. We want very much to hear all you've got to say."

Slow comprehension was coming into Joe Baggio's dark eyes. He was looking at the faces of Court Jackson's aides. These two gentlemen were staring vaguely at some imaginary spot on the ceiling. Joe Baggio started to speak, choked a little, and his words were gasped.

"But, Court, you're keeping your promise? You're helping me lam? I'll never come back! Just gimme my split on the last deal and I'll beat it south! Wildcat Gordon will be coming down on you here!"

IN the middle room, Tiny Traeger had ceased dancing. She was sitting in a chair at the table. The mustached mobster who had become her special admirer was getting a little drunk himself. One hand strayed to one of the girl's white shoulders. Tiny sprang up and started singing.

From the room behind her, she had heard Joe Baggio's words.

"Wildcat Gordon will be coming down on you here."

If she could only be sure of that. She could see Quick Trigger's ash-gray face, and his eyes were open and watching her intently. She was aware he could not, would not speak. He would now understand the trick she was attempting to work.

Tiny strained her ears to hear more from the room in which Court Jackson was having his conversation with Joe Baggio. But the conversation had become only a muttering.

Court Jackson said: "All right, boys, you heard Joe say he wants to go away. I think that's the smart idea. You'll help him leave the country."

Joe Baggio's thick lips were working in an effort to force out words that had frozen in his constricted throat.

"You can't—not that!" he managed, hoarsely.

Court Jackson could see the beginning of a scream forming in Joe Baggio's tightened vocal cords, and one thumb gave a signal. One of the boys stopped that scream. Joe Baggio went limp, and his legs dragged between the pair as they pulled him through a door to the outside.

"Not too far away," instructed Court Jackson. "I have my reasons for poor Joe to be found near the shack."

Apparently the two boys did not take Joe Baggio too far away. Nor did Joe Baggio ever utter a scream. The boys did not risk a pistol shot that might have been heard at a distance. One believed himself to be very expert with a knife, and he liked to demonstrate.

He was even careful to wipe off all possible fingerprints from the handle of the knife when it protruded from Joe Baggio's neck. Then he carefully cleaned the blood from his hands, by rubbing them in the dirt and leaves on the ground.

Joe Baggio was left lying with staring, sightless eyes looking up at the trees. He was out of the country, and he would not go down the river for life. Neither would he lose his head and talk.

Court Jackson's two boys returned and received new instructions. The gambling boss remained out of sight, as they went into the room where Quick Trigger sat rigidly bound in the chair.

Tiny Traeger covered a sudden feeling of terror with wild laughter.

CHAPTER XIII
A TRAP FOR WILDCAT

OLD Quick Trigger glared at Court Jackson's aides. One of the boys who had just disposed of Joe Baggio said, "You're a smart guy, so you'd do some talking and save your neck."

"I've got nothing to talk about!" snapped Quick Trigger.

"The boss thought of that," smiled one of the boys. "So, you will be given something to talk about. We're pushing you to the telephone in the other room, and you'll have some conversation with Wildcat Gordon."

Quick Trigger's jaws locked, and he shook his head stubbornly. But his eyes were on Tiny as his chair was brought through the doorway, and he knew then that this was one time when there was more than any fear for his own life to be used as a weapon against him.

Court Jackson had not appeared. One of his aides spoke in low words to Quick Trigger and pushed him to a telephone in a corner of the room. The other mobsters quieted, listening. Tiny's blue eyes

suddenly became misty; then they seemed to turn dull and lifeless.

The girl had not heard the order issued to Quick Trigger, but she did hear him get a number and ask for Wildcat Gordon. Tiny's bit of acting then was the best she had done. Her rounded head wobbled; then her chin fell downward. The blue eyes seemed to be almost glazed and she slumped forward.

The mustached mobster grinned and he rubbed a hand across one white shoulder. Tiny's flesh may have crawled at the touch, but she gave no outward sign. She was in every detail a very drunk little girl who had been knocked over by the last of many drinks she had appeared to take.

Yet Tiny saw the pistol pushed against the back of Quick Trigger's neck, and she heard his words distinctly.

"It's me, Wildcat! I've got them spotted, and we can grab Joe Baggio ourselves! Come alone, for a crowd couldn't get by the way we've got to go in!"

Old Quick Trigger paused, and Tiny heard one of the men mutter and push the pistol harder against his neck. Quick Trigger gave a short, spasmodic cough and talked again.

"Sure, Wildcat! There's only two fellows with him! We can have Baggio back in his cell before daylight! Now, meet me at the first turn in the second lane to the west below Judge Kyley's place! I'll be waiting by a big elm that slants over the road! I'd stop the car at the intersection and walk down! It'll be safer!"

"That's enough!" hissed the man with the pistol. "O.K.!"

Quick Trigger coughed again as a man replaced the receiver and started to move his chair back. Tiny had seen and heard. Also, she now saw that the eyes of every man in the room were centered upon old Quick Trigger. Her right hand had dropped limply into her lap under the table.

She realized there might not be another chance like this. Any hope of freeing Quick Trigger without being discovered was gone. She knew Wildcat Gordon would be on his way within a minute after getting that call. And this was the trap.

A DOZEN mobsters were suddenly galvanized by shock. Tiny was on her feet. The dainty girl moved lightly backward, putting all in the room in front of her as she got to the wall near a door.

Tiny had whipped an automatic pistol from under her dress. Her small hand was steady and her eyes were blazing.

"Get over to one side, all of you, and put up your hands!" she snapped, the treble of her childlike tone sounding strange. "I'll empty this gun into the first one that makes a wrong move!"

They were a dozen tough thugs, for all of the sleekness of some of them. But they recognized deadly intent, even in the voice of as pretty a child as they had ever seen. Growling oaths, the men in the room lifted their hands and moved away from Quick Trigger.

"You!" snapped Tiny at her special friend, the man with the mustache. "Get the handcuffs off of my grandfather, and do it fast!"

Amazed comprehension grunted throughout the room. Perhaps some there had been tricked by women, but never by a child like this, a little "fluff," as they had been led to believe, who hadn't seemed to have a gray cell in her curly head.

His face working, the mustached mobster slowly started unlocking the handcuffs holding Quick Trigger's hands behind him. One man tried bringing his hands down slowly, but popped them up again when Tiny s automatic swung unerringly upon him.

The handcuffs were clicking free when Quick Trigger suddenly reared up in the chair, his head striking the mobster in the face.

"Tiny! Look out! Look out!"

The warning was too late. The darting hand of Court Jackson shot over one of Tiny's shoulders with the speed of a snake striking. The pistol exploded spitefully and a mobster got a slug in one leg; but the hard edge of Court Jackson's palm had fallen with a blow on the girl's wrist.

The automatic slapped to the floor, and Court Jackson swept the girl around, knocking her down with a flat-handed blow that set her ears ringing

"I had a fair idea all the time!" rapped the gambling boss. "I try to pick boys with brains, and you turn out to be just a bunch of soft mugs for a pretty face! But it isn't so bad, at that! If one plan fails, we've got what it takes to bring Wildcat Gordon walking right into our hands."

Quick Trigger swore wildly as Tiny was picked up and carried into Court Jackson's room, and the door was closed.

WHEN Quick Trigger had finished talking over the telephone, Wildcat Gordon replaced the receiver. He was in a room in Judge Kyley's mansion. Failure to raise Quick Trigger at the inn had filled him with cold apprehension for the safety of the older man, and for Tiny.

Wildcat Gordon came nearer at that moment realizing he was in love with Tiny Traeger than he ever had before. Hard-boiled copper, tough ex-army officer, Wildcat had always regarded Tiny as little more than a child.

He would have scorned the idea that the adorable Tiny had no thought for any other man in the world. He was sure he was too old and too tough a specimen to even think of the girl as other than a smaller sister who needed to be looked after.

In fact, Wildcat knew so little of the ways of

women that he had actually imagined Tiny had really got into bad company and was at the Society Casino by unlucky chance.

But the words of Quick Trigger had not been all the old man's message conveyed. For a long time, they had used special means of communication for just a situation such as this. Quick Trigger had given a hard, little cough twice while he was talking.

That cough said to Wildcat: "Danger—I'm being forced to talk!"

So Wildcat's decision was swift and to the point. He found Sheriff Callahan.

"Judge Kyley has enough to think about, Cal," he said. "I have just been invited into a sweet, little gang trap. I figure some of the boys have Quick Trigger, maybe his granddaughter, and they've got a smart idea they are going to give me the works."

"Thought you had somethin' on your mind, Wildcat," drawled Sheriff Callahan. "Sort of got a hunch tonight you ain't been followin' my advice to keep your hands off a mess that ain't in your own bailiwick. Whatcha plannin', Wildcat?"

The homely sheriff was ready to go the limit on anything Wildcat might suggest, in spite of his contrary talk.

"I imagine I've got a date with a bunch of thugs under a big elm tree in the second lane down the hill," grinned Wildcat. "I'm keeping that date. Now if some of your deputies happened to spread out in the woods and keep undercover, we might have an interesting session. They're expecting me to come alone, so I will be."

LESS than ten minutes later, Wildcat ran one of Judge Kyley's small cars under the trees where the second lane turned down the hill. He was wearing his usual loud raiment and a tight grin as he walked into the lane and slanted his eyes at the trees, seeking an elm that spread over the road.

Though he expected action to come from some ambush ahead of him, he was not so sure of that. For the bulky Jeffrey had seen him take the small car from the garage. And Wildcat had then seen Jeffrey slip from the door of the garage, pass the State police still guarding the house and disappear into the woods near the road.

The narrow highway was winding, and Wildcat imagined Jeffrey would know a shortcut that might enable him to beat the car to this spot. So he was shooting sharp glances over one shoulder, and was sure he could pick up any moving shadow in the moonlight.

Wildcat saw the spreading tree over the road at the first sharp turn. And just as he made sure this must be the place named by Quick Trigger, he became aware that the big Jeffrey had darted across the lane behind him.

Wildcat had been unable to make further attempts to fix the suspicion in which Jeffrey was already involved. For his own purpose, he had said nothing about the finding of evidence that Arthur Watson had been brought to the mansion in the trunk compartment of the sedan which Jeffrey had been driving.

Sheriff Callahan's deputies were trained to the hills. Wildcat could hear the slightest sound that indicated they had moved into the woods ahead of him.

The sheriff had known the tendency of city mobsters to keep to roads and their poor ability to find their way in the woods. His own men might have been animals of the wilderness, as they moved, singly, through dense thickets.

Wildcat Gordon did not see big Jeffrey again as he reached a spot under the elm tree. Neither did he see nor hear any other person. He kept strictly to the instructions of the telephone conversation.

"Quick Trigger!" he called out softly. "It's Wildcat!"

Both of his hands were touching the silenced pistols that had helped make the Whisperer famous, the weapons that gave forth hardly more sound than the Whisperer's own voice.

He was prepared to go into action, but at the same time he realized the slightest mistake now might mean the lives of Tiny and Quick Trigger.

Everything depended upon Sheriff Callahan's men trailing Wildcat's prospective captors to the place their prisoners were held. Any fight Wildcat made must be only to make it look good.

Attack came from a direction Wildcat least expected it, and he swore as he realized why the spreading elm tree had been specified. Like a chump, he had walked directly under its branches.

A looped rope *swished* down, settled over his shoulders and tightened. At the same instant, a man jumped from where he had lain concealed on a wide limb, and his knees drove into Wildcat's back.

WILDCAT had enough breath left to remove the man from his back with a gripping hold that almost broke the man's neck. The rope tightened and drew Wildcat's feet from the ground. Half a dozen figures came from the shadows. Wildcat thought he saw big Jeffrey among them, but he could not be sure.

With his arms trapped, Wildcat proved how effective a pair of loose feet can be. Court Jackson's mobsters certainly were given no reason to suspect that Wildcat Gordon had come there with the deliberate purpose of being taken a prisoner.

Three men lay groaning on the ground when Wildcat was finally subdued and his weapons removed. The rope that had been used as a loop was wound around the commissioner almost to his knees. The captors had learned their lesson.

But they could not have believed other than that Wildcat had been neatly trapped.

He was pushed ahead a short distance along the lane; then he was turned off into a descending pathway through the trees. Wildcat now was framing his action when the mobsters arrived at their goal. He could only hope that he was correct, and that Tiny and Quick Trigger would be prisoners there.

He listened intently, but heard no sound that might indicate the shadowing by the sheriff's deputies. Big Jeffrey was not among the men with him. Wildcat could only guess what might have become of the burly chauffeur.

Perhaps he had watched Wildcat Gordon leave Judge Kyley's house, and his only purpose had been to reach the mobsters and inform them he was coming.

Interlacing trees prevented most of the moonlight from penetrating to the soggy pathway. But in a cleared space, perhaps a hundred yards ahead, Wildcat caught a flickering of light in a window and the outlines of a rough slab cabin.

The presence of this cabin made him sure Tiny and Quick Trigger were close. Wildcat's muscles grew tense under the binding rope.

The attack by Sheriff Callahan's men would have to be in silence and swiftly carried out; otherwise, the prisoners and he himself stood a good chance to be wiped out. Wildcat could hear nothing.

Then the surprise came so unexpectedly and from such a source that Wildcat became riveted with horror.

All of the roof of the cabin in the clearing heaved upward, with a blinding blaze and a whooshing explosion. Flames immediately shot long, blue tongues from windows and doors. The whole structure separated with a fiery blast that sent the air eddying and whirling around Wildcat and his captors.

Wildcat had a momentary glimpse of a new man running toward the mobsters holding him. He did not hear what this man said, for at that instant the butt of a gun crashed on his skull and Wildcat became insensible to all around him. He had only the flashing, horrible thought that the lovely Tiny and loyal old Quick Trigger were prisoners in that flaming house!

WILDCAT had no means of knowing how long he lay unconscious, but it could have been but a few minutes. The cabin in the clearing was still a flaming mass, and there were gunshots crackling in the woods as he came to his senses.

"Guess you'd better take another swig of this," said the voice of Sheriff Callahan.

The sheriff was holding a flask of brandy to Wildcat's lips. He choked and the fiery stuff crept into his numbed brain. He almost wished he had not become conscious.

"The girl? Quick Trigger?"

These were his first words. Sheriff Callahan's homely face was grim and quiet.

"You might as well know, Wildcat," he said, slowly. "Some of my boys heard a woman scream. We were waiting until you appeared to give a signal, and then that shack busted wide open. I'm afraid maybe one or two of the boys must have been spotted, and they knew it was a trick."

Wildcat got stiffly to his feet. It was impossible to approach the blazing pile. Wildcat had the sick feeling that the flame was a funeral pyre. It would be hours before the truth could be determined, for there was no water at hand, no means of quickly cooling what might be the crematory for his two best friends.

"One of my boys got it," said Sheriff Callahan, grimly. "But they rubbed out two thugs. And Wildcat, Joe Baggio got his some time before that fire started. Your escaped prisoner is lying over there, with a knife in his throat."

Wildcat derived no satisfaction from seeing the ghastly corpse of the thick-lipped Joe Baggio. Only it confirmed a belief he had held all the time. The cheap "fence" was only a pawn in a bigger game directed at terrorizing Judge Kyley.

Wildcat could pretty well guess what had happened. He knew the Joe Baggio type, the kind of a rat who would always squeal when he was cornered. Perhaps Joe Baggio had known too much about the murder of Arthur Watson.

Court Jackson had escaped the rap many times. How far was his hand in this?

The explosion and fire aroused the nearby countryside. Again posses were being hastily formed. Sheriff Callahan directed them in making a combing drive of the woods on all of the hillside.

But, except for two mobsters, all had vanished. It seemed incredible they could so quickly have eluded the deputies who were trained woodsmen.

Dundas, the Englishman, was among the first to join the hunt with several of his servants who had been deputized and armed. The stretch of woods through which the mobsters must have fled also enclosed the Dundas mansion with its hillside view. Therefore, the Englishman had got his own men into the search ahead of all the others.

"The damnable rotters!" swore Dundas, when he and his men were questioned with the faint hope someone had seen Tiny Traeger and her grandfather being taken away. "I would jolly well like authority, Sheriff Callahan, for my servants to shoot to kill!"

"Shoot to kill!" said Sheriff Callahan, grimly.

WILDCAT GORDON was sick, but he forced himself to turn from the horrible fascination of the

slowly subsiding blaze at the cabin. He led Sheriff Callahan, Dundas and several deputies across a deep ravine in the direction of the Society Casino.

Wildcat only said something might be discovered about the Casino that would give them a lead. He led them adroitly toward the spot where The Whisperer had left Detective Rantz handcuffed to a tree.

"Hellamighty!" roared Wildcat when he saw Rantz with the gag in his mouth. "What brought you here?"

He purposely appeared to be as astonished as the others. He pulled the gag from the detective's lips.

"What's this all about, Rantz?" he demanded. "You've got some explaining to do! Perhaps you could tell us some more about how Joe Baggio escaped, and how he got himself rubbed out?"

Detective Rantz stared at Wildcat Gordon, and no doubt he was debating what he should tell. He choked a little, and Sheriff Callahan crowded close. Wildcat heard Dundas order his own men to make a quick search of the vicinity.

Perhaps the nerve of Detective Rantz broke, or he may have deemed it unwise to tell about The Whisperer. Anyway, Rantz had lost the money that doubtless had paid for Joe Baggio's escape.

"They got Joe Baggio?" he gasped. "That means they'll get me, too! Commissioner, I've got to tell the truth! I can't go through with this! I never went crooked before, honest!"

Sheriff Callahan played a flashlight on the detective's face. It was an unintentional mistake. A rifle cracked. It could not have been far away. Detective Rantz bent slowly forward, his handcuffed wrists sliding down the tree.

CHAPTER XIV
WHERE IS JUDGE KYLEY?

THEY watched the blue hole in Detective Rantz's forehead slowly become rimmed with red. The rifle bullet had passed through his skull and blasted out the back of his head.

Detective Rantz had paid for his mistake.

Sheriff Callahan and Wildcat shouted orders. A dozen deputies dashed in the direction from which the shot had come. Then there were two other quick shots and the enraged voice of Dundas, the Englishman.

"You confounded blighter! He's gone up that way, men!"

Wildcat and the sheriff came upon Dundas pulling himself to his feet. A revolver was smoking in his hand. His nose was bleeding, and a lump was rising under one eye.

"I ran right onto him, the bally scoundrel!" shouted Dundas. "He was a big fellow, as big as that Jeffrey! I couldn't see his face before he swung his rifle and flattened me out!"

The servants from the Dundas house were running and shooting. Sheriff Callahan was forced to call out an order to hold up on it, for his own deputies were near the line of fire.

Again the deputies and posses combed the woods. Wildcat picked up the brass shell of a .30-40 caliber rifle from the place where the murder shot had been fired at Detective Rantz. It seemed inconceivable that any of the mobsters could have been so close, and yet have eluded the tight search that had been made.

Wildcat again had an idea. None but a native, familiar with these woods, could have moved about so deceptively. Big Jeffrey had displayed amazing facility at getting through these thickets when he had been following Wildcat.

Sheriff Callahan led the way back to the scene of the cabin fire. The red-hot mass would hold its ghastly secret for many more hours. Wildcat Gordon pulled his army hat low to conceal the emotion in his Texas eyes.

Nearly always those eyes were cold, almost without expression. Now they were hot and burning, and it was not from the heat of the dying fire.

WILDCAT had seated himself on a fallen log. He told Sheriff Callahan he would remain there. Even his interest in the happenings at Judge Kyley's mansion was forgotten.

But his numbed senses suddenly were snapped back to action. A man came running down the path from the lane above. He was swearing heavily. When he saw Wildcat and Sheriff Callahan, he shouted: "Judge Kyley! They've got Judge Kyley! He's nowhere to be found, and the cops have gone over every inch of the place!"

Wildcat's surprised oath was indicative of double amazement. Sheriff Callahan was also staring at the man who had brought this latest word.

For it was big Jeffrey, the chauffeur.

Big Jeffrey stood there, demanding that they hurry, that they must find the judge. His voice was heavy, as if the disappearance of Judge Kyley were a personal matter.

Wildcat shook his head to clear his brain. Big Jeffrey had followed him from the house. He thought he had seen him during the attack in the lane above.

Dundas had said the man who killed Detective Rantz looked like big Jeffrey. Wildcat estimated time and distance. It was possible that Jeffrey could have been in those places, yet have reached the mansion in time to learn of Judge Kyley's disappearance.

There was nothing in Jeffrey's heavy face to read, unless it might have been real concern for the safety of Judge Kyley. And that seemed too incredible.

Jeffrey imparted the information that Judge Kyley had last been seen in the vicinity of his library.

JUDGE PATRICK KYLEY, like his daughter, Ann, had come to a belief that all of the murder mystery somehow centered around that partly denuded room of tragedy. The Judge had not heard Wildcat's telephone conversation, nor had he known that Wildcat had departed on a mission of his own.

The Judge believed everyone in the house but himself was sleeping when he softly opened the big library door. He knew the police still ringed the house and the grounds, but he was not aware of a servant who had followed him on noiseless feet.

This servant was none other than the wrinkled, sage Wah Kin, the Chinese cook. Had Judge Kyley but known it, Wah Kin had been for hours in the upper hallway, his slanted, black eyes watching the Judge's door.

Only once had Wah Kin left his position, and that was when a telephone bell took him close to the door of a room in which Wildcat Gordon had talked with Quick Trigger.

The wrinkled cook had listened to Wildcat's end of the conversation. He might or might not have understood the meaning of the message, but there had been an inscrutable smile on his yellow face as he had returned to watching Judge Kyley's door.

So, when the Judge went into the library, Wah Kin saw the firelight from a blazing log in the wide grate play briefly upon the Judge's figure before the door was closed. Anyone observing Wah Kin would have seen him shaking his head and heard him whispering to himself.

Judge Kyley inside the library, stood in the middle of the floor attempting to arrive at some new angle of thought. Not an inch of the big room but had been gone over, sounded and probed.

The judge walked over to the ponderous, ebony desk.

This desk was of enormous weight. It was set solidly upon a broad base, only its center being clear for anyone who might want to use it. Judge Kyley seated himself in the carved chair which had held the body of Lun woo, and later the unconscious form of Ann Kyley.

Judge Kyley had been informed by Wildcat Gordon only that his daughter was in a safe place. The judge trusted Wildcat implicitly.

Now the judge's hand strayed over the ornamental work along the side of the great desk. He was looking along the walls at the ceiling at the several points in the room where expert hands had discovered nothing that would indicate a secret passage.

Judge Kyley did not see the noiseless movement of the library door. It swung open less than half an inch, but in that half inch was a gleaming eye. It was much the same as the night Lun Woo had made his tragic prayers to the sacred rug, for the scrawny figure of Wah Kin was crouched close to the door.

Again tonight, there might have been either mocking laughter or murder behind Wah Kin's wrinkled, yellow face.

Suddenly, Judge Kyley was startled. His thunb had pressed a bit of scrollwork in the side of the big ebony desk. He had a feeling as if the desk had yielded to the slight pressure of his hand, as if it were slowly moving away from the chair.

The judge kept his thumb on the slot and waited. He glanced down and judged he must be mistaken, for the ebony base rested upon the same lines in the floor. His gaze went to one wall. Then he had the amazed sensation of believing both the floor and the desk were moving.

Judge Kyley, for all of his courage, realized his emotions had been overwrought. Perhaps the shock of discovery was causing him to grow dizzy. Surely it would not be the odor of some spicy incense he was breathing.

The judge's broad shoulders drooped, and his gray head dropped forward, his chin striking upon the desk. Whether the phenomenon of movement ceased or continued, Judge Kyley did not know.

THERE was an interval, dreamless and timeless, and the judge attempted to raise his head. The effort brought intense pain, and his whole body was numbed by wrappings that precluded any movement of his arms or legs. His breath was nearly cut off by tape crudely plastered over his mouth.

Just as Ann Kyley had done, Judge Kyley became slowly aware of his surroundings. He saw the unfinished interior walls of an unpainted shack without windows. Light seeped in through some crevices in the roof. An oil lamp burned in a corner and seemed to give forth the odor of incense.

The judge might have been in the storeroom of some collector of valuable art. The prized pictures, vases and other objects from his rented mansion were ranged along the walls. Then Judge Kyley became aware he was lying on a thick rug, the Oriental rug that had been removed from his library.

Two men sat hunched over a bottle and glasses in a corner of the shack. Judge Kyley made a groaning noise, and they turned their faces toward him. The judge had never before seen these men, and they

made no effort at concealing their identity.

Judge Kyley tried to move, and the men glanced at each other and nodded their heads. One went to a telephone in the corner of the shack and made a low call. He waited several minutes, but got no reply.

"We'll have to wait," he told his companion, "but I don't like this. The sooner it is over and the place burns, the better it will be. We've gone too far to back out, and we'll have to finish fast."

The men's glances chilled Judge Kyley. There could be no doubt but that his own life was included in the mentioned finish. He tried to distinguish outside sounds by which he might possibly locate his position. All that he heard was the whisper of tires on a car passing along a highway some distance away.

ABOUT the time Judge Kyley returned to consciousness, posses were combing the woods outside the mansion of mystery. Except for the servants and one sheriff's deputy in the lower hallway, no guard had been established inside the house. It had been too thoroughly searched to admit thinking that any murderous abductors might be lurking inside.

One deputy had been instructed to keep a close eye on big Jeffrey, the chauffeur. But there had been nothing furtive about Jeffrey's movements after he had given the alarm of the judge's absence. The big man had spent some time outside with the others; then he had gone to a room adjoining that of Judge Kyley.

But, for all of the deputy's watchfulness, two figures passed him in the dimly lighted lower hallway without being observed. One was all in gray, blurring against the wall, and the other was black as midnight and kept to the shadows on the floor.

These two figures entered the curio room downstairs without being seen. They were The Whisperer and his dog, the vicious Scottish terrier, Brian Boru.

The Whisperer did not pass many minutes in the curio room. The dog with the glowing eyes seemed to understand why they had come there. His black nose sniffed at the spicy aroma hanging heavily in the room. Brian Boru nosed about the table on which Arthur Watson had been murdered, and along the rugs.

After a minute, The Whisperer hissed softly: "Find him, Brian Boru! Follow him!"

The faintest whine came from the terrier, and he whisked eagerly toward the door. The Whisperer had seen that even while they had been hunting for Judge Kyley, more valuable objects had been taken from the curio room. Whoever had seized the judge must have been in the room.

Brian Boru stayed close to the wall, nosing along, but he went directly to the stairway leading to the second-floor hallway. Halfway up these stairs, The Whisperer paused and froze in his tracks.

He had seen another figure move in the hallway below. He was being trailed by someone who also had eluded the guard and was gliding from shadow to shadow.

At this, only a whispering chuckle came into The Whisperer's throat. Brian Boru preceded him into the upper hallway, and went directly to the door of the murder library. He stood there with a low whine, waiting.

The Whisperer then might have been expected to follow the dog, for clearly Brian Boru was following the scent of the cinnamon oil that had been laid by his master. But The Whisperer acted quickly and strangely.

He opened the library door, let Brian Boru inside, and hissed, "Stay there, Brian Boru!"

He closed the big door and glided farther along the hallway. His next pause was before the door of big Jeffrey's room. The bulky chauffeur and bodyguard could be heard moving about. The Whisperer rapped softly.

Jeffrey growled and turned the key in the lock. The Whisperer shot a glance over one shoulder. The man who had been shadowing him from downstairs was a lump of blackness at the head of the stairs.

He could not have missed The Whisperer's sudden spring into big Jeffrey's room or the thudding blow of a fist that cut upward under the chauffeur's chin.

JEFFREY bellowed an oath of surprise and flailed out with both his huge fists. A blow from either would have put the lighter Whisperer on his back. But his head rolled with the swinging blows, and he came up and countered across one of Jeffrey's heavy arms with a straight, driving right to the chin.

Jeffrey swore wildly and managed to land one blow that nearly cracked one of The Whisperer's ribs. It must have maddened The Whisperer, for immediately the big chauffeur was given a demonstration of why one James Gordon had become known in the police department as Wildcat.

The Whisperer's fists hammered into his heavy features until the knuckles became sogged with blood. Jeffrey went down, got up, tried to use a knee and had one raised leg jammed backward over his head. Then his skull was being pounded on the floor and Jeffrey emitted a sighing groan and lay still.

The Whisperer twisted two sheets from the bed and trussed big Jeffrey into a motionless knot. He pulled the bulky body to a closet and locked the door. When he got back to the hallway, he paused, listening, one hand gripping the butt of a silenced pistol.

The man who had trailed him upstairs had disappeared. The Whisperer gave a ghostly, mysterious chuckle.

"I thought that's what he would do," he hissed to himself.

He glided to the library and entered, shrinking close to the wall and remaining quiet. Brian Boru was flattened on the floor in front of the cheerful blaze in the fireplace. His black head turned and the terrier actually seemed to nod in human fashion.

"Where did he go, Brian Boru?"

At his master's demand, the terrier arose, circled the big ebony desk and moved along one book-filled wall. But he came back and lay down with his nose on the tiling before the fireplace.

CHAPTER XV
SMOKING OUT RATS

THE WHISPERER called Brian Boru over to the big ebony desk. His uncanny memory had lined up that desk with some other immovable objects in the library. He was sure the desk had somehow got out of line with these. It seemed nearer one wall than it had been.

The Scottish terrier had a mind of his own. He obeyed the command and sniffed around the ebony desk, but he went back to the fireplace and laid down with his nose on his paws. He acted as if he liked the warmth from the blazing log.

The Whisperer examined every inch of the desk and the floor around it.

"Funny," he whispered. "It's planted there and nothing has moved, yet it's changed position."

He glided to the hallway door and glanced out. The hallway was empty and silent. The Whisperer nodded, as if he had expected the man who had shadowed him to come no farther. The shadower undoubtedly had heard the struggle in big Jeffrey's room, but he had gone away after that.

When The Whisperer turned, Brian Boru was standing stiff-legged, scratching at the smooth tiling beside the fireplace. All of the broad chimney had been gone over carefully a number of times. There had been a fire constantly burning.

The Whisperer again attempted to divert Brian Boru's attention to the big desk. The terrier persisted in staying by the scent of cinnamon oil he had followed. It was incredible, for the chimney was of ordinary construction.

The Whisperer got down on his hands and knees and peered upward above the blazing log. There were only four walls of smooth bricks and they were hot. No living man could have passed through there. But this did not change the mind of the persistent dog.

The Whisperer recalled a fire extinguisher on a wall outside. In a few seconds he had this, and though he had waited and listened, there was still no sign of the man who had followed him to Jeffrey's room.

A MINUTE later, the blazing log had been extinguished. Bryan Boru still sniffed at the chimney in the library. The Whisperer crawled into the hot aperture of the fireplace. He had sounded every piece of tiling and found no concealed spring or opening.

But in a minute, he was digging at the burned bricks inside the fireplace with a paper cutter taken from the desk. The steel went into an open space, and a brick fell out. More bricks were pulled away, and then The Whisperer could feel a draft of air sucking past his head.

His flashlight showed a passage, wide enough for three men to have ascended; and it had iron ladders on two sides. Moreover, the passage through the cleverly built double chimney went downward to the lower floor, and from its position, it could only have opened in the curio room below.

The Whisperer was alertly on guard. He expected any minute that one or more men would come bursting through the door of the library. He might have only a minute or two to work. With an ear bent to the iron ladder passage, he heard the murmur of voices.

A man was saying: "Something cracked. I smell smoke coming up. Try and get the boss again. I'll keep watch here."

That passageway was narrow and any man attempting to ascend could have been blotted out from above without having a chance. And The Whisperer knew now where that passage terminated above, how the many objects had been removed and the murders committed. He could only hope that Judge Kyley was up there and alive.

That word about the smoke gave him an idea. He whipped back into the library, gathering up tapestries that were priceless, along with some clothing and Judge Kyley's rubber raincoat from a rack. He widened the opening into the passageway upward, and set some of the clothing on fire.

In a minute, he had a blaze burning merrily in the passage itself, and upon this he dropped the rubber coat and some lighter inflammable curtains.

Thick, oily smoke of the clothing and rubber coat filled the passage around the iron ladders. He heard a howling oath above as the space was filled with choking fumes. It would be some time before anyone could attempt to descend the ladders.

The Whisperer locked the library door on the inside. He could hear deputies and State police outside beginning to shout an alarm. They had seen the thick, black smoke pouring from a place where no fire could have reasonably been expected.

One of the blank, square towers on the high roof appeared to be burning, for the smoke came from there, though there was no sign of a blaze as yet. Intent upon this phenomenon, while some were running to find ladders, the police did not see the gray-clad figure swinging up the ivy-covered wall.

Brian Boru was slung snugly to The Whisperer's belt. His master was climbing outside passing the remaining story below the roof. The Whisperer surmounted a corner angle of the eaves, dropped on the sloping tiles and freed Brian Boru. The dog started digging in with his toenails and making toward the smoking tower.

Rats can be smoked out. Without doubt the two men who were with Judge Kyley in the tower were finding that a combination of cloth and rubber creates blinding fumes. The Whisperer heard them cursing and pounding at the board framework of the square tower on the inside.

Thin boards were already bulging outward. The Whisperer gave a command to Brian Boru, crouched, then waited. The police and members of the neigborhood posse in the grounds had not found a ladder that would reach halfway to the tower. Some were trying to climb the walls, while others were darting into the house to reach upper windows.

The figure of a wildly cursing, blinded man crashed through the thin boards of the tower, closely followed by another. Neither of the two men could see clearly, but they held rods and apparently were desperate rats ready to shoot their way out of the trap.

No opportunity was given for a clean shot, though one man gave The Whisperer a bad five seconds as slugs screamed off the tiling.

"Nail him, Brian Boru!" came the eerie, penetrating whisper.

DOWN below, the policemen then must have seen The Whisperer and the two men. An order was given to shoot, and then abruptly countermanded by the voice of Sheriff Callahan.

"I'd hold it, boys! Can't be sure who might be up there!"

Then the coppers on the ground gave a gasp. Flung with all the power of the Whisperer's iron-hard arms, one man flew through the air with sprawling legs and arms. His body struck with a sickening thud three long stories below.

Another man seemed to lose his balance and hurtle backward, alighting in such position that his spinal column gave forth a sharp crack. Both men lay very still. The second man had what might have been the slash of a knife across his throat, but that had been caused by the striking fangs of Brian Boru.

The dog had dropped back to the roof, scrambling away from the eaves. The Whisperer swung him to safety, then pushed his way into the tower. Judge Kyley was on the floor. His position had saved him from much of the thick smoke, but he was unconscious.

Now the police below had seen The Whisperer's gray figure as he went into the tower. The smoke was thinning. When Sheriff Callahan was told it was The Whisperer, he rescinded his order and bullets hammered into the thin framework.

The Whisperer got Judge Kyley onto the roof, where he was safe from both bullets and the smoke. His oddly twisted face was grim as he realized the impossibility of getting away over the roof and down the walls.

Either he would be shot, or he would be trapped, and the carefully preserved secret identity of Wildcat Gordon would be made known.

The trapdoor leading into the chimney was partly open and smoke still poured from it. The Whisperer slung Brian Boru to his belt, took a deep breath and started down the iron ladder inside. His lungs were near the bursting point as he dropped rapidly. He knew when he passed the opening in the library chimney, but suddenly decided he could not logically escape from the murder room.

Then he found out the secret passageway went even lower than the curio room. He had got below most of the smoke and could take a breath. Brian Boru coughed and whined.

Finding the inside operation of an opening was simple enough, for there had been no concealment. The Whisperer grinned when one side of the foundation section of the chimney proved to be a door. When it opened, he stepped out cautiously.

His ghostly chuckle sounded as he found himself in the one place of all where he would have most desired to be. He was in the basement garage where the chimney ended. He realized that anyone reaching the mansion garage from the outside could have gone directly up into the false tower on the roof without ever entering the house.

There was no doubt but that members of the murder gang had been constantly in that tower. From there they had been able to make their mysterious entries and exits in the library, the curio room, and to the outside.

The police had hooked together two ladders and were erecting them. One man was crawling toward the roof. In a minute, he would discover the bound Judge Kyley and the rug and other valuables taken from inside the mansion. The attention of the police and posses was concentrated on the climbing copper. They heard him shout.

"It's Judge Kyley! He's alive!"

AT that instant, a small car clashed its gears in the basement garage and swung out into the driveway, gathering speed. The Whisperer was at the wheel crouching low, his head below the window level and driving almost by instinct.

Then came what he had expected. Police guns yammered, and slugs tore into the windshield and the metal of the car. The Whisperer skidded the little car out of the driveway onto the curving highway before the surprised coppers thought to get to any of their own cars.

He thought he had made a clean getaway, when the rear of the car slued around and he headed for a tree across the ditch. His powerful hands pulled the car back into the highway, but a flat tire swayed it dangerously.

The Whisperer heard other cars starting. You could not beat pursuers on a mountain road with a flat tire. He shot the little car around the first bend, caught Brian Boru's collar and bounded over the ditch and into the woods as the automobile reared up and turned over.

The time wasted by the police getting to the car and ascertaining it was empty gave The Whisperer the minutes he required. He was in a clump of bushes less than a hundred yards away when the pursuit started.

Brian Boru was sent away with a whispered command. The dental plates came from The Whisperer's mouth. A white substance was wiped from his hair. A round-brimmed hat disappeared, and a folded army hat came out and was pulled over one eye. A coat was turned and a necktie affixed. Wildcat Gordon then whipped toward the highway.

CHAPTER XVI
THE MYSTERIOUS SHADOWER

WILDCAT GORDON swore loudly, pulled out a police revolver and cracked out its chambers. He then went scrambling up an embankment toward the figures of a moving posse, shouting: "Down this way, boys! It was The Whisperer! I think perhaps I hit him!"

He met Sheriff Callahan in the road, and the sheriff swept a suspicious eye over Wildcat's clothes.

"Thought you'd gone up to the house, Wildcat?"

"I did, and I was inside when I heard your boys yelling and shooting. I got outside and tried to head off that car by going over the hill through the woods. When it crashed, The Whisperer hit the trail, and I didn't get to him. I think he went toward the burned cabin.

Sheriff Callahan converged his men and the posses in that direction. When he turned back, Wildcat Gordon had vanished again. The homely sheriff shook his head.

"Danged if you can keep even an eye on that greasy eel," he muttered.

Judge Kyley had been brought down to the lawn outside the mansion. He was being revived, but not sufficiently to recall what had happened.

About this time, Wildcat Gordon went into one end of the second-floor hallway. He was The Whisperer again as he reached the other end. The library door was locked, and there seemed to be no one moving in the house.

The Whisperer was using a slender piece of lock-picking steel on the door he had closed, when he became aware that a nearby shadow was more than just a shadow. He had caught the faint gleam of metal, and he knew he was seeing a knife.

He continued working silently at the lock, slowly bracing himself on his toes. He was apparently an unsuspecting target, his back presented to the gleaming knife as the shadow came noiselessly along one wall.

THE assassin emitted one low, hissing breath and sprang, then bright steel was flashing downward. The Whisperer went down, but he was a split second ahead of the murderous blade. The knife thudded into the door and stuck there.

There was one short scream of agony and a Chinese word, and Wah Kin, the wrinkled cook, lay at The Whisperer's feet with his scrawny neck badly twisted. The Whisperer pushed open the library door, pulled Wah Kin inside with one hand, then closed and locked the door.

So silent had been The Whisperer's subjection of the murderous Wah Kin, the man who had descended into an opening in the library floor beside the heavy ebony desk had not heard the pair enter.

He became aware of The Whisperer's presence only when steel claws seemed to fasten on his thick neck, and he was jammed forward into the aperture he had been entering.

Judge Kyley had been correct in believing the big ebony desk had moved. But The Whisperer saw that the man who had reached the big vault concealed under it had been compelled to use carpenter's tools to loosen floorboards that had been laid tightly above the hidden cache.

The space had been cleverly built into the library floor. It had room for a big iron box and several other containers. The Whisperer noted one of these was open and that costly jewels lay in profusion about the floor of the vault.

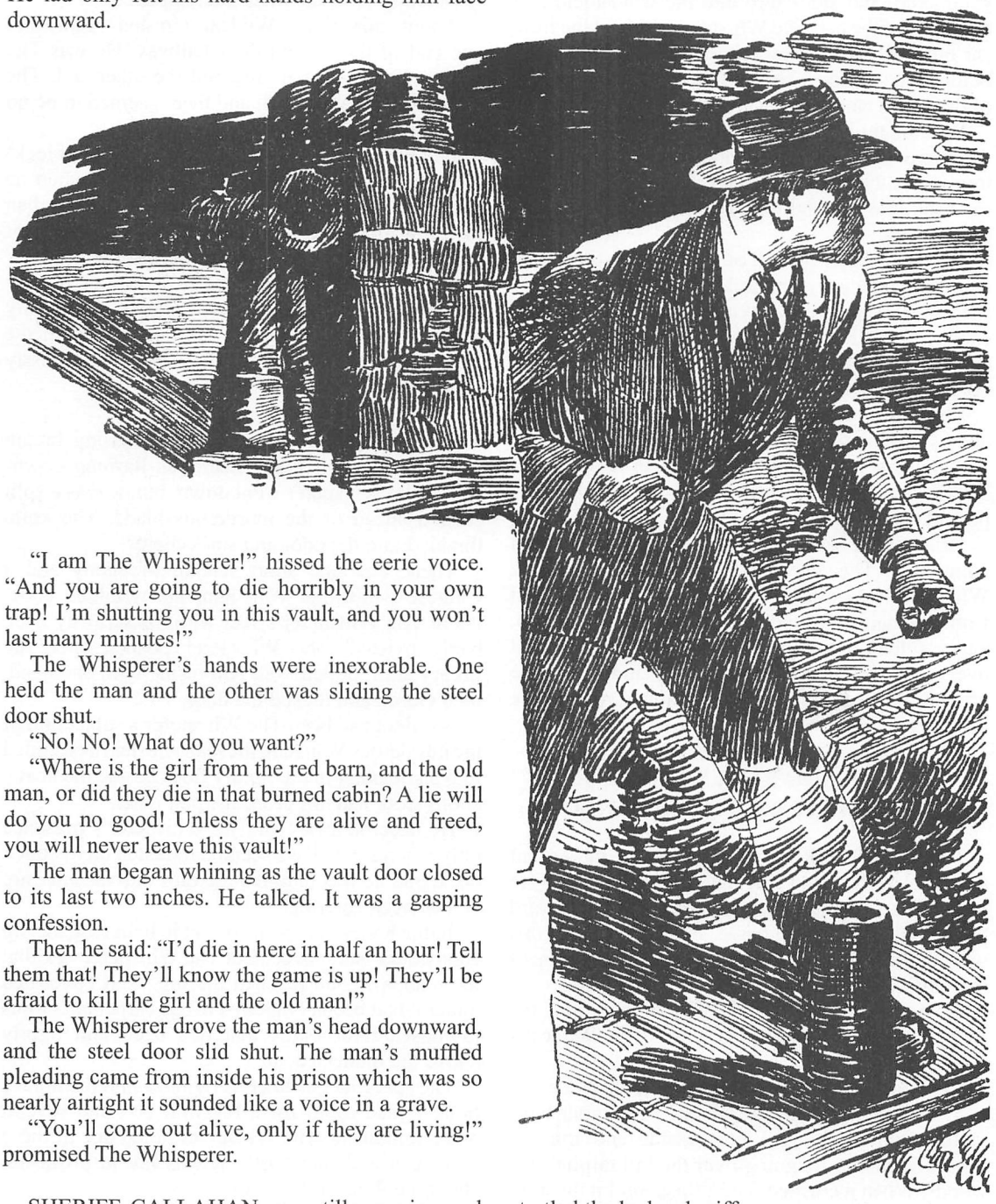
Under the floor, the vault had been closed by a sliding steel door over which the floor had been laid solidly.

"Let me go!" gasped the man now under The

Whisperer's hard knees. "Look! There's millions! I'll split it! I had to take a chance when The Whisperer found the way to the tower! Damn him! In another day I could have scared Judge Kyley out of here and had the way cleared!"

The man had not seen The Whisperer's face. He lad only felt his hard hands holding him face downward.

Flung with all the power of the Whisperer's iron-hard arms, one man flew through the air with sprawling legs and arms. His body struck with a sickening *thud* three long stories below.



"I am The Whisperer!" hissed the eerie voice. "And you are going to die horribly in your own trap! I'm shutting you in this vault, and you won't last many minutes!"

The Whisperer's hands were inexorable. One held the man and the other was sliding the steel door shut.

"No! No! What do you want?"

"Where is the girl from the red barn, and the old man, or did they die in that burned cabin? A lie will do you no good! Unless they are alive and freed, you will never leave this vault!"

The man began whining as the vault door closed to its last two inches. He talked. It was a gasping confession.

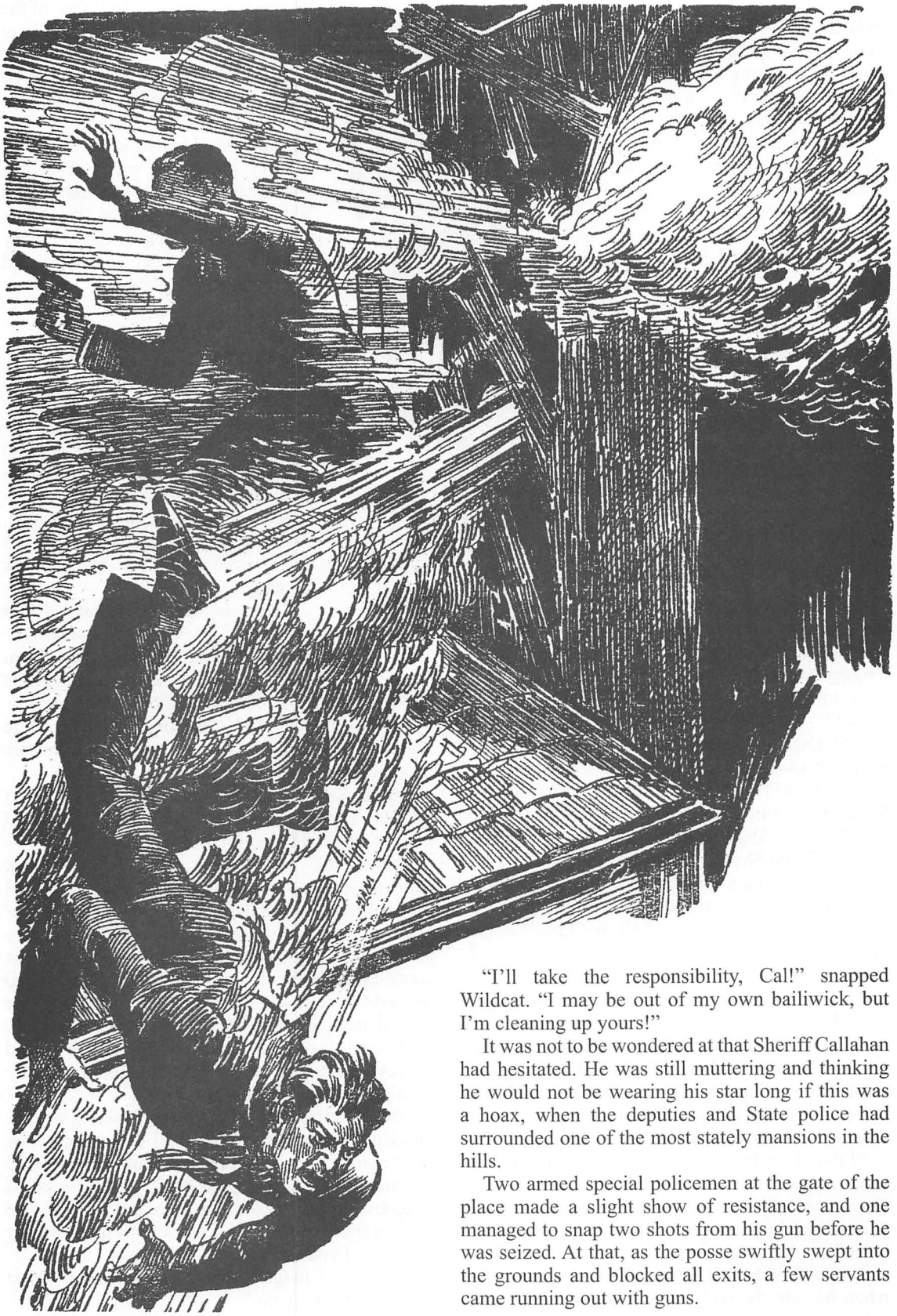
Then he said: "I'd die in here in half an hour! Tell them that! They'll know the game is up! They'll be afraid to kill the girl and the old man!"

The Whisperer drove the man's head downward, and the steel door slid shut. The man's muffled pleading came from inside his prison which was so nearly airtight it sounded like a voice in a grave.

"You'll come out alive, only if they are living!" promised The Whisperer.

SHERIFF CALLAHAN was still guessing and swearing when Wildcat Gordon suddenly appeared at his side. Wildcat spoke rapidly and said there was no time to be wasted. He outlined something that startled the lanky sheriff.

"You're crazy, Wildcat!" said Sheriff Callahan. "I can't go busting into places like that without a search warrant!"



"I'll take the responsibility, Cal!" snapped Wildcat. "I may be out of my own bailiwick, but I'm cleaning up yours!"

It was not to be wondered at that Sheriff Callahan had hesitated. He was still muttering and thinking he would not be wearing his star long if this was a hoax, when the deputies and State police had surrounded one of the most stately mansions in the hills.

Two armed special policemen at the gate of the place made a slight show of resistance, and one managed to snap two shots from his gun before he was seized. At that, as the posse swiftly swept into the grounds and blocked all exits, a few servants came running out with guns.

"Out of the way!" rapped out Wildcat. "Now, you fellows inside, your boss is washed up and none of you will live long enough to even try to beat the chair if you touch either one of the prisoners!"

Grim-faced coppers were at all exits with rifles and two machine guns, when the dozen or more men started coming out. They walked out with their hands high, and as Wildcat whipped past them, Sheriff Callahan was grunting a few oaths.

They were some of the mobsters who had eluded his posses near the burned cabin. They had not been found, because they had been sheltered in the last possible place any copper would have looked for them.

Wildcat Gordon got Tiny Traeger free and he surprised both of them by kissing her suddenly.

He covered that gesture with: "Wait till I get you home! You'll get what's coming to you for making a fool of yourself!"

"All right, honey," murmured Tiny, her blue eyes dancing.

"Shut up!" snapped Wildcat. "Quick Trigger, you'll have to send this child back to school until she learns some sense!"

Old Quick Trigger grinned broadly, rubbed a bruise on his head.

"I reckon Tiny and me wasn't doin' so good, Wildcat," he said plaintively. "You had any luck?"

"'Low it's about time to spill the rest of this, Wildcat," said Sheriff Callahan.

"Come on," said Wildcat. "I've got another dead Chinaman for you to look after, and I wouldn't be surprised if the brains of all this hasn't passed out."

THE brains behind the mystery murders had not passed out.

But when the steel door of the vault under the library floor slid back, two deputies had to pull the red-faced, puffing Englishman, Dundas, out beside the ebony desk. He would not have lasted many more minutes under that tight steel door.

"I found out he was there, and he seems to have had a collision with The Whisperer," stated Wildcat Gordon, calmly. "It's too bad we now have to spend a lot of good tax money seeing that he goes to the chair."

Dundas puffed and sputtered, but his eyes rolled when he saw the body of Wah Kin huddled over by one wall. The wrinkled face of the cook was as inscrutable in death as in life.

Judge Kyley had revived, and he said: "Wildcat, what happened to poor old Wah Kin? He looks as if a gorilla twisted his neck."

"I'm afraid he must have also encountered The Whisperer," said Wildcat. "I found one of Wah Kin's carving knives sticking in the library door. He failed to get back his sacred rug of the Late Full Moon."

CHAPTER XVII
THE LOYAL JEFFREY

WAH KIN had indeed failed to regain possession of his sacred rug of the Late Full Moon. For Wildcat Gordon revealed that he had discovered Wah Kin to be working on the inside with Dundas the Englishman, on the sole promise that the sacred Oriental rug would be restored to his keeping.

"There is no doubt but that Wah Kin murdered Lun Woo, the houseboy," stated Wildcat. "He must have been supplying food to the men Dundas had living in the square tower above the chimney. They took the rug and other objects away, while Wah Kin attended to the little matter of a murder here and there."

Judge Kyley and Sheriff Callahan stared at Wildcat Gordon. They said he might believe all that, but it would be difficult to prove.

"Not at all," stated Wildcat Gordon. "For Wah Kin's fingerprints are all over his kitchen tools, and they were on the hilt of the rapier that killed Arthur Watson in the curio room. That was after Dundas here and his chauffeur, Perkins, brought the body into the house through the chimney. But, first, Dundas had opened the sedan driven by Jeffrey and left a clue there to make it appear Jeffrey was the guilty man."

Wildcat had sent deputies to free the dazed Jeffrey, and the big fellow was sitting in the library rubbing his bruised face.

"Sorry, Jeffrey, but The Whisperer seems to have mussed you up," said Wildcat. "I don't know how that crook got into it, but Dundas was attempting all the time to throw suspicion on you. Dundas killed Detective Rantz to keep him from talking. Then he made it appear he had been attacked by the murderer and named you, Jeffrey."

"But," said Judge Kyley, "how about this Court Jackson and the gang."

"Only a mob Dundas was using, Patrick. He framed that holdup on the highway, merely so he could come along as your neighbor and a good Samaritan and cover up. Dundas was known ten years ago as Gypsy Landers, a master jewel thief. He built this mansion and hid his loot here in the library, then went to State prison in another state, and the house got out of his hands."

JUDGE KYLEY saw the answer then. Dundas had come back to get at his jewels and had succeeded in frightening John Burton from the place, but not before Judge Kyley moved into the mansion. He then had to terrorize Judge Kyley, and his knowledge of the chimney passage to the tower on the roof gave him his opportunity.

"But Court Jackson?" said Sheriff Callahan. "They're all in my bailiwick, Wildcat. It looks as if this thieving Whisperer is really the one who is needed as a witness."

Wildcat plucked a petal from the red carnation in his buttonhole.

"There's the little matter of the murder of Joe Baggio, and the Baggio case was only camouflage to keep the real motive of the mystery undercover," he stated. "I've happened to learn that Jeffrey here is an ace detective with an insurance company, and he took the job with Judge Kyley to get close to Dundas, knowing him to be Gypsy Landers, and that he had a big cache of stolen jewels laid away somewhere."

Big Jeffrey grinned sheepishly through his bruises. He looked straight at Wildcat and never batted an eye as he said: "I may be a dick, but I'm putting in the next few days getting that Whisperer. Boy, what a helluva lacing he gave me before I could even get going! And I think his whole idea was to mislead Dundas, the same guy I was out to get!"

Big Jeffrey's woeful complaint got a laugh that was abruptly silenced. A bewitching girl was coming into the library. A minute later, she was in Judge Kyley's arms.

"What happened, honey? Where have you been?" asked Judge Kyley.

Ann Kyley's eyes blazed at Wildcat Gordon.

"Your friend, Wildcat, had me locked up in the county jail; that's where I've been!" she flared.

"In jail?" gasped Judge Kyley. "Sheriff Callahan, you didn't put my daughter in a cell?"

Sheriff Callahan glowered at Wildcat Gordon. Wildcat pulled his army hat lower over one eye and grinned.

"I'm outside my own bailiwick, Patrick!" he said to the judge. "I tried to talk Cal out of it, but he locked her up in spite of my protest. You'll have to ask him to explain."

Sheriff Callahan's face reddened and he seemed about to explode.

"Why, you damn, double-crossin' polecat—"

But Wildcat Gordon had quietly walked to the doorway. He turned with a wide grin.

"Thanks for a quiet week, Patrick," he said, calmly.

THE END

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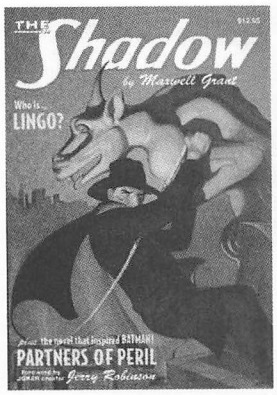

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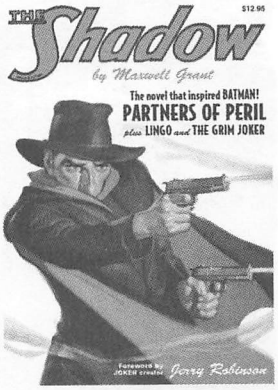

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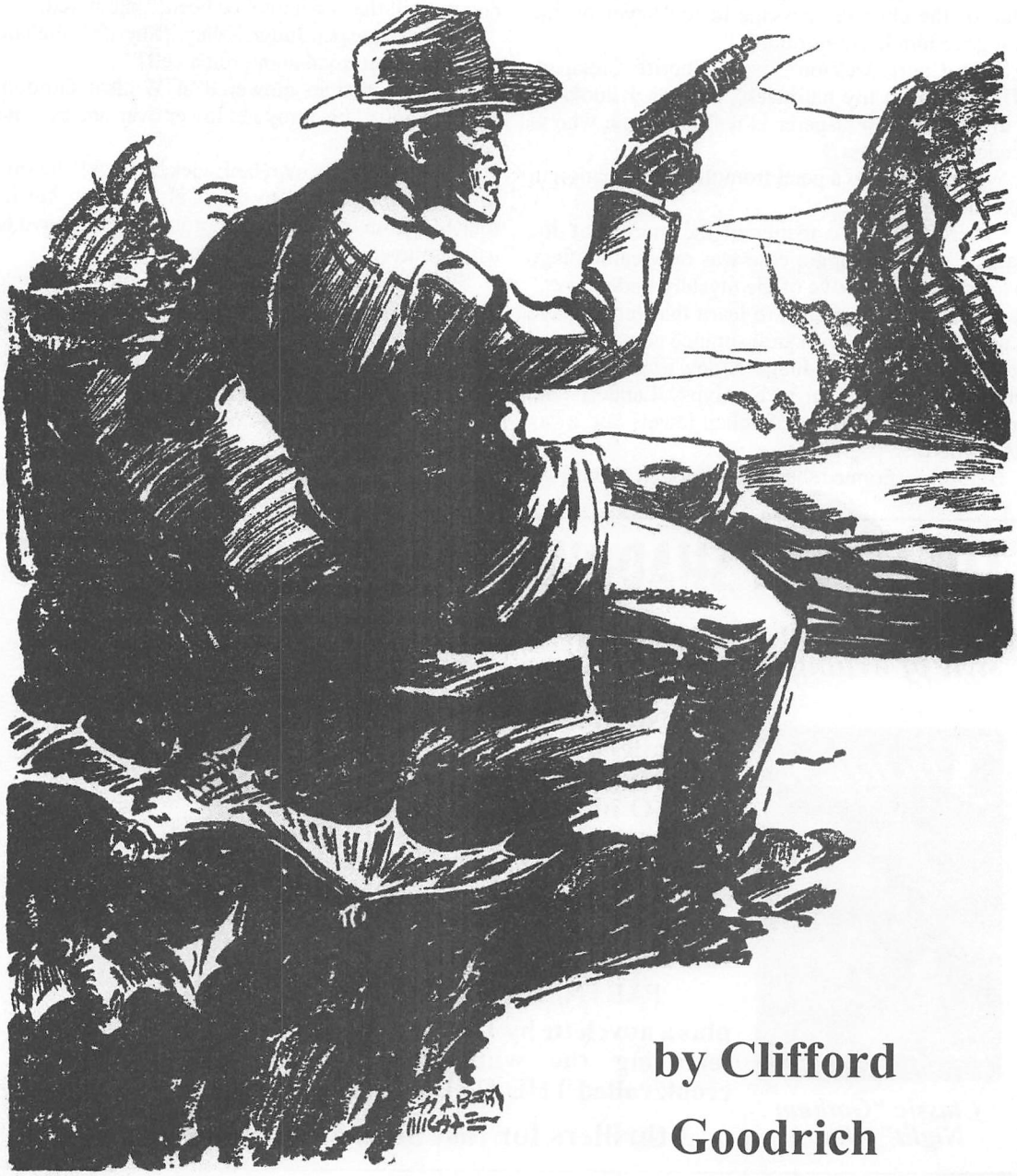


by Clifford Goodrich

Justice strikes at the hands of The Whisperer!

A FOUL odor filled the air around the wispy man with the blurry white hair. There was a dull beating of wings; invisible wings that were part of the black night itself. Tiny, ravening eyes gleamed at their prey.

The wispy man twisted, jerked back his oddly pointed chin. His eyes were almost devoid of coloring. The wings beat down on him. A girl screamed nearby. Then the loathsome creatures of the night, foul and repulsive, covered the slight figure in gray.

Unclean, furry bodies brushed against his face. Sharp teeth clicked as he dodged back from the onrush.

One of the little man's fists leaped from his clothing. A queer oversized pistol flashed dully. There was a hissing, as if highly compressed air was being released through a nozzle. The other hand flicked on a powerful flashlight.

Giant bats fluttered above the small man. Their little eyes glittered redly. Sharp incisor teeth showed them to be *Desmodus rufus,* the deadly vampire of the tropics. But they were ten times as large as the vampire in its native habitat. The beasts were more than three feet in length. Their reddish-brown fur protected them from the northern climate.

Wings rustled weirdly as they fluttered away from the light of the flash. They couldn't stand light. The little man paused. The pale rays showed a quaint round-brimmed hat. His breath went out in a whispering chuckle as eerie as the giant bats themselves.

"Perhaps," he said huskily, "this is the answer."

"We don't," a rich contralto voice behind him breathed, "need The Whisperer to find out whether it is. There are enough people bothering my father!"

A gun jabbed into The Whisperer's back.

The little man turned. He put up his hands. But he twisted to look at his assailant. She was a smallish girl, well formed and pretty. Her eyes were dark, filled with suspicion or hatred. Or both.

The queerest thing about her was her headgear. It was an odd, cagelike contrivance, like an oversized catcher's mask, that went entirely around the back of the head.

The Whisperer knew who she was. She was Miriam Nordat. Her father, Jerem Nordat, owned

the weird old farm on which they stood.

Nordat had come to the city to find a place to experiment with his vampire bats. He had crossbred them, made them gigantic. No one seemed to know just why he wanted to do it. Some people said he was just nutty, But his original attempt had been financed by "Confidence" Kanner.

Confidence Kanner had been buried the day before. A passing detective had seen Confidence leaving the General Hospital, two nights earlier. There was shooting. Confidence had stolen more than a million dollars' worth of radium. The mobster had gotten away, but he was captured later.

Three men he had left tied up in front of the hospital safe were the only persons who could identify Confidence Kanner. One was J. Harrison Johnson, the superintendent. The others were both physicians. One was Doctor Merton Kling, a director. The other was Doctor Gerald Entennor, the medical examiner.

Confidence was wounded, when captured. Confidence predicted his own death. Accurately. He just seemed to waste away. In his last hours, he babbled about vampires and unnatural death.

Nurses in attendance decided he was simply delirious. Doctor Entennor attributed it to blood loss when he was shot by the detective.

But they buried him. His body went to a nice marble mausoleum in one of the best cemeteries. And, later, several persons wondered about the vampire business. It turned out to be horribly peculiar. When Confidence had predicted his own demise, he also said his three accusers would meet a fate that was identical.

THE WHISPERER thought of that as he looked at the girl. And he wondered just how much she knew, or was trying to hide. Angry shouting from the house ripped into the night. That disconcerted the girl just a little.

The Whisperer did not strike her. One slim hand touched her neck just under the cagelike mask. It pressed against a nerve center. The girl simply went to sleep.

The Whisperer noticed that her legs and arms were encased in stout canvas garments. The bats could not touch her. So the wispy figure in gray crept slowly toward the house.

Suddenly, a light flashed in The Whisperer's face. Dark forms of several men converged upon him.

"At last!" a nasal voice cried out. "The Whisperer! We've got him!"

Strong men plunged onto the small body of the gray man. Perhaps his smallness saved him. There was a sudden eruption. It was as if the ground itself had exploded. The man with the flashlight muttered. The light was knocked from his fist.

As it fell, it showed the group to be uniformed officers. They suddenly found they were fighting only with themselves.

The Whisperer, who the police considered a supercrook, bounded over the ground toward the road. The cops yelled and milled about. As the gray figure ran, he underwent a startling transformation.

A movement of his hand and the powdery white hair became a reddish hue. One hand went to his mouth, and The Whisperer's oddly pointed chin vanished. The jaw became as square and hard as a chip of granite. It was a chin distressingly familiar to a great many crooks.

The figure dodged into a dense thicket, peeled off clothing and shoved it in a bundle under a hedge. The grayish clothes were replaced now by a checkered suit that fairly shrieked in the gloom. A bright-red carnation gleamed from the lapel of the coat. A necktie matched it.

An army hat was cocked at a jaunty angle. It was a dangerous angle for crooks. The man was Police Commissioner James "Wildcat" Gordon.

He circled to a driveway, stamped up to the milling group of cops. His flashlight snapped on. The man with the nasal voice looked startled.

He was a tall, unpleasant-looking fellow, with a nose like a finger. He had a small mouth, which made gulping motions like a fish about to take a hook.

"I told you to check up on Zlotni, Henry," Wildcat snapped. "I expect you to follow orders!"

The unpleasant-looking fellow was Deputy Commissioner Henry Bolton. He had just two reasons for existence in his narrow mind. One was to catch The Whisperer without actually having to tangle with him. The other was to replace Wildcat Gordon as police commissioner. He hadn't gotten far in either direction.

BOLTON gulped again as he followed Wildcat up the steps to the farmhouse porch.

"J. Harrison Johnson, the hospital superintendent, is dead," he blurted. "They found his body in his house, tonight. No one had been there since yesterday. He died just as Confidence Kanner predicted: There were two marks on the ankle; there wasn't a drop of blood in the body!"

A hulking figure met them at the doorway. He had quick, sharp features and thin hair. He was Doctor Gerald Entennor, the medical examiner. He turned a pale, harried face toward Wildcat Gordon.

"I—I'm on that list Kanner threatened," he stammered. "There's something rotten behind this thing. I'm afraid Johnson is just the first to go. Someone is getting revenge for Kanner."

Wildcat's gray-blue eyes did not change. He had learned of Johnson's death. That was why he had

come to see Nordat's vampires. He knew the vampire bat is no myth; that it is feared in many places. The vampire lives on blood, and blood alone.

And he knew that a million dollars' worth of radium had not been recovered.

Wildcat Gordon's eyes snapped as he passed into the main room of the house.

"I agree with you, Doctor Entennor," Wildcat drawled. "But Henry has been assigned another job to do."

Bolton sniveled. He acted as if he were going to wipe his nose on the sleeve of his coat. Then he went out. Wildcat turned to the other occupant of the room.

He was a disheveled old man with a mass of unkempt black hair. The eyes were coal-black, and glittered with an odd intensity. He seemed very excited. His voice was a throaty cackle.

"You cannot kill my vampires," he rasped. "The true vampire cannot be killed! And those killed by a vampire do not really die!"

His voice rose as he talked. It became almost a scream. Wildcat Gordon wondered whether Jerem Nordat was really mad, as many persons said. Or if it was a carefully feigned madness to cover something much worse.

Nordat came from the Balkans, where many ignorant peasants still believe in the foul supernatural evil of the human vampire, the werewolves that take the form of the bat.

Nordat was supposed to have split with Confidence Kanner when he refused to accede to some demand of the killer. Perhaps he had. Or perhaps he had not. Wildcat Gordon made a quick decision.

"We won't kill them, now," he rapped. "But get them into their cages, wherever you keep them."

Jerem Nordat licked his thin lips. Without a word, he moved toward a switch on the wall. He walked with a queer, crablike gait. He pulled the switch and his black eyes glittered at the window. Wildcat looked out.

The entire area was bathed in bright light. Blue-white floodlights glared from treetops. Dozens of the horrid winged beasts wheeled in the brilliance. Frightened, they made almost a straight line for a cavernlike opening in the side of a hill.

When the last one had entered, Nordat pulled another lever, closing a gate. Then he hobbled outside and went into the cave himself. He rushed out in a moment, his mouth working strangely.

"Four of my babies are gone!" he cried, shrilly. "Now they won't come back until morning!"

Wildcat Gordon whirled.

"I expected that," he snapped. "Put out the lights. You, Doctor Entennor, drive home in your car. Don't open the windows. It's going to be either you or Kling, this time!"

WILDCAT turned to Nordat.

"Can any others get out?" he demanded.

"No," Nordat told him. "There is another exit from the cave, in the back. It runs from a ledge by a deep fissure that goes in a hundred feet down. But I sealed it up."

Just before Nordat turned out the lights, a loud, roaring voice crashed through the night. A tall, gaunt individual strode up toward Wildcat. He was hatless. His head was a bald expanse of cranium with two gray tufts at the sides. He had deep, peering eyes that squinted. His neck was constantly craned forward, as if he were nearsighted and found it difficult to see what he wanted.

But retired Deputy Dick Traeger, better known as old "Quick Trigger," usually saw a lot more than most younger men. And he knew what to do about a thing when he saw it. He had practically raised Wildcat Gordon.

"Wildcat, I been—" he began.

The commissioner cut him short, just as the lights went out. They were standing near the bat cave. Wildcat bent over quickly. He had been watching the footprints of everyone in the yard. His camera eye caught sight of one set that belonged to no one he had met that night.

From one pocket he took a thick tube of paste, squirted it quickly into a depression in the ground below him.

He looked at his wristwatch for a few seconds, then lifted the impression of his specially developed, quick-drying moulage. He examined it under his flashlight.

"I've had prints made of the shoes of everyone I suspect," he said, "and I've memorized them."

"Whose is that?" Quick Trigger demanded.

"Zlotni's," Wildcat replied. "I think there's plenty going to happen tonight."

Zlotni was the only name held by a fuzzy-headed giant who had been a well-known hypnotist on the stage, years before. Financial misfortune had befallen him and he had gone crooked—all the way. Lately, he had been a henchman of Confidence Kanner.

The pieces of a mental jigsaw puzzle were beginning to fit in for Wildcat Gordon. But it was a long way from complete. Revenge might be the motive of Zlotni. Wildcat spoke in low tones to Quick Trigger. He spoke of The Whisperer.

"Dammit all, I don't like this!" Quick Trigger groaned. "I wish my hands had been cut off before I got to making those dang dental plates. It's too dangerous!"

Quick Trigger was the only man alive who knew The Whisperer was Wildcat Gordon. A master of disguises, he had made the queer dental plates that

distorted Wildcat's sharp tones into the ghostly whispering voice of The Whisperer.

"It'll be all right," Wildcat said. "He won't get hurt."

But neither of them saw the slight figure move in the darkness behind them. The figure halted to listen, then crept toward the house. It was a girl, and there was a queer, cagelike contrivance covering her head.

Wildcat Gordon, invisible in the night, picked up the bundle of clothing he had hidden behind the hedge. He drifted out toward the road.

THE palatial residence of Doctor Merton Kling was dark. It was about all that Kling had left of importance. Bad investments had taken most of his former wealth.

The gray, smallish figure of The Whisperer seemed to appear from nowhere in the big yard. He knew which bedroom Merton Kling slept in. That was where The Whisperer intended to begin a vigil.

As it turned out, the vigil didn't last as long as he had expected.

The walls were covered with vines. Stout latticework held up the creepers. The Whisperer climbed silently until he reached the window he sought. It was closed but not locked. A thin knife wedged under the sash. The sash went up noiselessly and The Whisperer glided into the room.

He closed the window behind him, stood motionless. At first, he heard only the rhythmic breathing of the man on the bed. Then his muscles tightened. There was a slow flapping of wings. Faintly, the foul, unclean odor of the giant bats came to his nostrils like a pestilence in the dark.

The Whisperer moved then, stepped quickly toward the spot on the wall where he knew there was a light switch.

Halfway across the big room he began to move more slowly. The foul odor was changing. It became sweet and cloying, heavy.

The Whisperer began to lose interest in reaching that light switch. His head began to swim. He felt as though he were drifting slowly to a bottomless pit. Drifting—drifting— He sank wearily to the floor and sighed.

THE WHISPERER moved weakly. He felt as if all strength had been drained from his body. He had felt that way once before, after he had given an emergency transfusion at a hospital. Slowly, he staggered to his feet, struggled to a light switch.

A flurry of wings sounded. Two big bat bodies whirred through the air, became frantic in the sudden brilliance. But The Whisperer's eyes were riveted on the bed.

Merton Kling lay there. But nothing mattered any longer to the hospital director. His face was pale; the body wasted, drained of its lifeblood. There were two tiny incisions on his right ankle.

The vampire death had caught up with Merton Kling—as Confidence Kanner had prophesied it!

And had the beasts not been surfeited by their first victim, The Whisperer might have gone too. As it was, one of the monsters *had* attacked him.

The gray man's silenced automatics came out. The ugly, loathsome giants of the night wheeled about the room. One of them struck the glass of the closed window. The glass shattered. The bat flapped out into the night air.

The second one was not so fortunate. Its body snagged on the jagged glass, fell mortally wounded to the floor. The Whisperer looked at it for a moment. Then a ghostly chuckle drifted through the room. The Whisperer turned out the light.

From a phone booth in a cigar store half a block away, the gray figure called a number. The booming tones of old Quick Trigger came to him over the wire. Quick Trigger alibied Zlotni for the entire evening. He could not have been near the house of Merton Kling. Quick Trigger had found him and trailed him.

The Whisperer put down the phone. Perhaps Jerem Nordat was not as crazy as he pretended to be. But The Whisperer knew that Zlotni had not been alibied the night before.

That was when J. Harrison Johnson had been killed. And that time, no chloroform had been used. An autopsy proved it. Yet The Whisperer knew that chloroform had robbed him of consciousness back there in Merton Kling's bedroom.

He decided he would see Zlotni. Quick Trigger had shadowed the former hypnotist to his lodgings. The slight gray figure stopped twice on his way. It took him quite a while to get to Zlotni's. He seemed to move stiffly when he arrived.

LIGHTS were blazing in Zlotni's living room. The Whisperer did not bother to ring the doorbell. He went through a window, as he had at Merton Kling's.

Zlotni sat in a chair. He didn't move a muscle. His pale, topaz eyes stared straight at The Whisperer. Then, for the second time that night, The Whisperer began to feel faint. He didn't smell anything this time. His head simply began to reel.

His strength was not up to standard. The vampire bat in Merton Kling's bedroom *had* sapped blood from his veins while he had been unconscious.

He fought against the faintness, but sank wearily to the floor. He thought, as he lost consciousness, of the extraordinary hypnotic powers Zlotni had possessed in his prime. It did not seem probable that

he could work his magic on The Whisperer.

Wildcat Gordon had learned hypnosis from Indian fakirs who knew their business. But— The Whisperer collapsed.

As he did, a door opened slowly from one side of the room. The light went out as a figure crept in. There was a flapping of wings, then silence. A dim light went on. The Whisperer's face was as pale as death. A hoarse chuckle sounded.

WHEN The Whisperer regained consciousness, daylight streamed in the window. He felt a slight dizziness and knew that some odorless drug had felled him. Otherwise, he felt no ill effects.

Zlotni was gone.

The Whisperer smiled grimly. There were several things that he knew. He knew now that there were two men behind a weird plot. And he knew other lives would be taken. At least one ruthless brain and a million dollars' worth of radium were concerned. And he knew that vengeance against three men was merely a pretense that hid the real killer.

Despite that, The Whisperer was not yet quite sure who that killer would prove to be.

Before he left Zlotni's rooms, he carefully peeled a heavy rubber garment from his legs. It was colored like flesh. The garment was like a double layer pair of wading pants.

One of his two stops the night before had been the laboratory of an industrial chemist. The other had been a slaughterhouse. He knew men in both places who worked through the night.

Animal blood had gone into the inner wall of the rubber pants. The vampire, for once, had been fooled.

Wildcat Gordon's car whirred through the city streets and out into the suburbs. It made the corner of the driveway into Jerem Nordat's farmhouse on two wheels. There were other cars ahead of him.

One thing Wildcat had in mind was to examine all of the bats in the weird cave. He didn't know whether it would be necessary. But it might prove a theory he had.

He bounded up the porch and burst into the living room. Doctor Gerald Entennor was there. So was Deputy Bolton. They were both questioning Jerem Nordat. The old naturalist answered in surly tones. His eyes were vague and he seemed dejected.

"The big ones," he muttered. "They are not what I expected."

"I want to know if all of your bats are now in the cave," Bolton whined.

Nordat shook his head up and down.

"My babies," he mumbled, "they all come back to me. I keep them."

Wildcat Gordon let the man talk. He was getting an idea. Several little items were falling into place.

Nordat rambled on in his conversation. There was a queer light in his eyes. He might be a shrewd actor. Or it might be a mind unhinged by shellshock. Wildcat Gordon had checked on his record.

"Your *babies* have killed at least two men," Bolton snapped. "I think you'll burn for it!"

Wildcat watched the old man closely. He didn't see Miriam Nordat behind him, didn't see her mouth open to protest. Nor did he see the rough hand that reached out from a door. It clamped over her mouth, drew her from sight.

"You can't kill my babies," Nordat babbled. "You can't kill any vampire! Only by a stake through the heart!"

WILDCAT GORDON made a sudden decision. It was one that caused many persons of prominence to be sure he was crazy. If his enemies had been able to act quickly enough, it would have cost him his job.

Wildcat knew the superstitions of the Balkans: The human vampire roves only at night, as the bats do. The spirit leaves the flesh in the tomb, sets forth in the darkness. It may take most any form. It lives upon human blood, and returns to its tomb before daybreak.

Many a Balkan peasant will swear on his deathbed that he has seen the vampires.

The only way to end the nocturnal awfulness is to drive a wooden stake through the heart of the corpse. Jerem Nordat gave Wildcat Gordon his wildest idea.

"We will disinter the body of Confidence Kanner," he snapped. "There may be something to this stake business."

Deputy Bolton's fishlike mouth gaped once. Then his little eyes gleamed. At last, the commissioner had gone off his nut. Henry could practically feel the badge of office burning on his breast.

"You're crazy!" he shouted, instinctively. Then he regretted that statement. Gordon might change his mind.

But Wildcat didn't. He turned to Entennor.

"What do you think, Doctor?" he asked.

Entennor shrugged.

"Medically impossible," he said. "But this case is screwy. Let's take a look at the body."

Old Jerem Nordat licked his thin lips.

"If he was taken by a vampire, the body will still be fresh," he cackled. "There is no *rigor mortis,* no real death with a vampire."

IT would have been impossible to state just what the sensations were of the persons who viewed the disinterment. The mausoleum was unlocked and an official committee went in. Wildcat and Bolton represented the police department.

Two prominent surgeons represented the medical profession. The thing had been kept as quiet as possible. But the story was too good. Persons through whose hands the invitations had gone had smiled to themselves. They called friends and told them "in strict confidence."

As a result, quite a crowd was outside. Many persons were snickering broadly. Henry Bolton had brought along a sharp wooden stake. He hoped Wildcat would use it.

The coffin lay on a stone pedestal inside the mausoleum. It was quite an expensive place. Kanner had bought it when his murderous rackets were bringing him more money than he knew what to do with. It amused him. He was right next door to some of the very best people.

The two surgeons opened the lid of the casket. They moved instruments about. They probed and they prodded.

"This man is very dead," one of them stated. "There isn't any question about it!"

Bolton grinned happily. But Wildcat Gordon sauntered to the casket and looked inside.

"Yeah," he snapped, "but it isn't Confidence Kanner. This is Zlotni, Kanner's hypnotist stooge! And he was alive last night!"

Henry Bolton's grin erased itself and a foolish look spread over his face.

Wildcat spoke slowly, as if only to himself.

"One of Zlotni's famous acts," he said, "was to induce a state of catelepsy simulating death. He may have succeeded in doing this to his boss. If so, he paid for his knowledge with his life. He was too dangerous for Kanner to let live."

Wildcat Gordon snapped suddenly erect.

"At any rate, Kanner is still alive," he rapped. "And whoever else is in this with him will be the next one he will kill! He is killing friends as well as enemies!"

The commissioner strode down the gravel driveway and jumped into his coupé. He slammed the door and drove off.

WILDCAT'S brain was active, as he roared down the street. He thought he saw the whole picture now. But he doubted that he would take Confidence Kanner alive. And if he didn't, he probably would never be able to prove a thing that he was sure of.

Nor would he recover a million dollars' worth of radium that was stolen from a city-owned hospital. Suddenly, he thought of something else. It occurred to him that it was strange that he had not seen Miriam Nordat at the farmhouse, that afternoon.

Wildcat had passed over one remark that Jerem Nordat had made. But he was sure that his daughter would have amplified it, would have been there to stress it, if she could. And in that same answer, Wildcat thought he saw the solution to the one problem that remained.

He gunned his coupé around a corner so fast that a traffic cop almost fell flat on his face. The cop didn't recognize the gray coupé and shrilled on his whstle. Wildcat was using the car that belonged to The Whisperer. The cop commandeered a passing automobile and gave chase. But it didn't do him any good.

Commissioner Gordon stopped at the General Hospital. He went to the X-ray laboratory and talked rapidly to the doctor in charge. He emerged a few moments later, carrying a queer-looking contrivance. He put it on the car seat beside him. Then he stopped at a disreputable lodging house in one of the toughest parts of the city.

This was where The Whisperer had private quarters. It was a neighborhood where few people asked questions. He carried a square box with him when he left.

It was dusk when the gray coupé neared the Nordat farmhouse. It stopped outside the driveway. The figure that emerged was that of The Whisperer. The wispy figure skirted the house and crept through the trees. At the mouth of the cave of the vampires, he halted.

He pulled out the queer contrivance he had gotten from the hospital. Then he set the other, the square box on the ground. He smiled queerly, walked softly back to the driveway.

His feet crunched on the gravel of the walk as he strode to the ramshackle house. He went quickly up the steps, ripped open the front door.

Blam!

A gun roared from the darkness within. Lead slammed past The Whisperer, nipped at his coat sleeve. The gun blasted again, but the figure in gray had leaped aside—just enough to save his life.

"Take it, rat!" a harsh voice grated. "You're on borrowed time, anyway!"

The Whisperer's silenced guns hissed in the blackness. Weird blue flame spewed into the hallway. But the small figure in gray was not aiming. He did not want to kill Confidence Kanner right then. He did not think Confidence would disappear until he had tried to kill the one remaining witness against him.

And he knew another reason why Confidence would not leave for a while. The Whisperer chuckled in hoarse, eerie triumph.

Blam!

Kanner's gun belched and roared. The lead came too close for comfort. The Whisperer's quaint, round-brimmed hat sailed off into the darkness. There was a hole in the center of it.

The Whisperer screamed as if in pain He slammed the door, fled toward the road. A car ground into gear and roared away. It didn't go far.

On The Whisperer's return trip, he approached the house stealthily, and from a different direction.

As he slid open a window, The Whisperer heard Kanner's voice on a telephone. It was the tail end of a conversation.

"O. K.," Kanner said. "Bring the thing with you." And he hung up.

Then the crook's footsteps took him outside. He walked to the road where he could inspect any car that approached.

The Whisperer chuckled again. Things were going just to suit him. He went through the house, room by room. In one of them he found Miriam Nordat. She was bound and gagged.

"Where is your father?" The Whisperer asked, as he removed the gag.

"I don't know," the girl stammered. "I think they're going to kill both of us! I thought you were one of them. Father—"

The Whisperer cut her off; there was no time to hear what she thought. He handed her a knife.

"If your father is in the house, free him," the gray man said. "If he isn't, your belief in him is wrong. Keep out of sight. You are in grave danger."

Silently, The Whisperer went down the stairs. He stopped to make a phone call. Then he walked softly across the great yard to the cave of the bats. An ordinary hasp secured the grating door. The gray man unlatched it, let himself in.

The foul odor was oppressive. Invisible wings fluttered ominously, as the small figure crept back into the black recesses of the cave. The pale beam of his flashlight flicked on. The Whisperer looked at one of the two contrivances he had brought with him. Black, furry bodies brushed against him. He waved them away, walked slowly, straight toward the rear of the cavern.

Then the light went out. The ghostly chuckle sounded again. The noise of a knife scraping followed. Then there was silence. It was broken only by the rustling of featherless wings. The vampires were stirring. It was night.

Heavy feet tramped suddenly outside the cave. Harsh voices split the air.

"You aren't going to bump me, Kanner," a voice said, flatly. "I'll take possession. If you do as I say, I'll still split with you."

The lighter darkness outside showed the silhouettes of two figures. One walked in front. Apparently, the one behind him was holding a gun.

The grating opened slowly. Great bats fluttered out into the night. Kanner stumbled as he entered the cave.

"I still don't like these damned things," he complained. "They give me the creeps!"

"Get that stuff, or you'll have more than the creeps," the flat voice reminded.

Kanner snapped on an electric torch. It showed only the rough rocks ahead. He stepped gingerly to the wall of the cave. A moan burst from his lips.

"It's gone!" he gasped loudly. "Some dirty—"

Blam!

THE flat-voiced man's gun had roared. Kanner slumped forward, struggled back to his feet. The flashlight clattered to the floor. But it didn't go out. Kanner whipped a gun from his pocket.

"I didn't take it, you rat!" he screamed. "We could split it two ways! We got rid of Johnson and Kling. There'd still be plenty!"

The moan of sirens cut the air outside. Police cars were rushing toward the farmhouse. Suddenly, lights flashed on in the cavern. The Whisperer hadn't counted on lights.

He saw Doctor Gerald Entennor holding a gun on his confederate Kanner. But Entennor saw The Whisperer, too. His gun blasted instantly, before The Whisperer could bring up his own automatics.

Kanner saw the gray man. He fired on instinct. Lead splattered on the rocks behind The Whisperer. The gray figure backed. His silenced guns hissed.

Then he stumbled. His heel struck a protrusion in the rocky floor. The Whisperer went over backwards. And he disappeared entirely. He had a flash of memory of Nordat's description of the cave. There was a fissure in the back, with a sheer drop of a hundred feet. This was it!

With The Whisperer, fell a million dollar leaden tube of radium. Wildcat Gordon had borrowed an electroscope from the hospital. He had suspected the bat cave was a logical hiding place for the stuff. Kanner knew all about Nordat's bats. And he would figure few other persons would relish an investigation of the cavern.

The electroscope—two gold leaves on a wire in a vacuum—had led The Whisperer directly to the highly radioactive fortune.

The sirens whined up to the mouth of the cave, as The Whisperer fell. Entennor whirled.

"You'll not talk," he snarled at Confidence. "I found you and killed you—that'll be my story! It will clear me!"

He squeezed the trigger of his gun. The roar was deafening. Confidence Kanner folded up quietly on the rocky floor of the cavern. Entennor turned with a smile to meet a squad of cops.

Quick Trigger was in the lead. His eyes showed that he was nervous. He was afraid Wildcat had overplayed his hand. Old Quick cursed himself again, for ever making those dental plates. He had been sure that disguise would some day bring death for Wildcat.

Behind Quick strode Deputy Bolton. Had he known what had occurred, Bolton would have been not a little pleased.

"I found the rat," Entennor stated. "He probably came back for some of his bats. I got The Whisperer, too! He fell down that hole, back there."

Bolton rubbed his hands.

"You've done a fine job, Doctor," he said in an oily voice. "You ought to be made Commissioner of Hospitals for this."

Bolton was always ready to play up to someone who looked as if he were on the way up. But this time, he was interrupted. A loud voice began filling the cavern with sulphur of the verbal variety.

"What's going on here?" the crisp tones of Wildcat Gordon roared. "It's about time this thing got cleaned up!"

WILDCAT GORDON stepped jauntily into the cave. If he had suffered a bad fall, he didn't show it. Fortunately, The Whisperer had remembered, in that flashing instant of descent, what Nordat had told him about the other exit of the cavern. He had told Wildcat that it led from a ledge by the lip of the hundred-foot fissure.

Wildcat had managed to grab at that ledge. He broke through the sealed-up exit.

Entennor's voice did not change. He was just as willing to claim credit in front of Wildcat as he was before Bolton. Wildcat interrupted him.

"What's this thing here?" he demanded.

It was the first time anyone had noticed a portable dictaphone in a square box. It was tucked against one wall. The Whisperer had gotten that from his rooms.

Wildcat stooped over. He seemed to pick a piece of paper from behind the machine. His hands moved too quickly for anyone to see that he had brought the paper with him.

"'Entennor is guilty'," Wildcat read. *"'This dictaphone will play a record of his conversation with Kanner here in the cave. In his car you will find a huge hypodermic syringe equipped at the tip with hollow incisors resembling those of a vampire. The capacity of the syringe is five quarts. The human body holds the same. It can kill only one man without being emptied. Only a doctor would have known how to design and operate such a contrivance.*

"'Entennor, Johnson and Kling were in it together. But only Kanner knew where he himself had hidden the radium. That was why Entennor played along with him after they killed the other two. They expected to blame the killings on Nordat's bats.

"'Unfortunately, the bats had not been developed to a size where even two of them could be fatal. Nordat discovered today that they were puny. The old man is suffering from shellshock. Hospitalization will cure him. Always your servant, The Whisperer.'"

WILDCAT put down the note. Beside the dictaphone lay the lead tube of radium.

"Shall I play the record?" he asked, simply.

Gerald Entennor's eyes narrowed to slits. Two guns leaped into his hands.

"I'll blast my way out or go down trying!" he snarled. "I don't care what's on that record! I'm bankrupt anyway, without my split on that stuff!"

Wildcat's gray-blue eyes were steady. He spoke in low, flat tones. Two guns were in his hands and he did not lower them.

"Whatever you do, you're going to burn, Entennor," he rasped. "You'll have to use your ammunition on me. Then Quick Trigger'll get you!"

Wildcat moved slowly ahead. Sweat burst out on Entennor's forehead. But old Quick was sweating even more. He knew Entennor was going to shoot. Quick tried to maneuver into a position where he could shoot first and save the life of Wildcat.

Instinctively, Entennor backed. In the last moment of defiance, he showed yellow. But Wildcat was wrong about Entennor burning. He didn't. The crooked doctor tripped, just as The Whisperer had tripped. And he didn't know about the ledge five feet down. He fell the whole hundred.

"I knew Entennor was mixed up in it," Wildcat observed. "Zlotni might have hypnotized Kanner into a state of catalepsy resembling death. But Entennor forgot himself in the little matter of an autopsy. The medical report has to show one. His did, as a matter of habit. He didn't dare oppose the disinterment. The finger would have been on him, right away."

Quick Trigger leaned over and started the dictaphone. Nothing happened.

"The Whisperer must have forgotten to turn the thing on," Wildcat offered. "Maybe he didn't have time. It is well we got a confession!"

Miriam Nordat had wedged her way into the group. She stifled a sob as she looked down the hundred-foot fissure.

"And that nice Whisperer went down there," she mourned, softly. "It must have been a horrible death!"

Quick Trigger snorted.

"Unfortunately," he growled, "it probably wasn't!"

THE END

More thrilling adventures of Wildcat Gordon will appear soon in The Whisperer no.3.

MASTERS OF MAGIC AND MYSTERY

Like his raconteur Walter Gibson, W. Bates "Norgil" Loring was a master of magic, mystery and misdirection.

"I applied much that I had learned about a magican's technique to devise situations in mystery fiction," Gibson explained. "I think every writer can work a hobby or adapt specialized knowledge to fiction uses."

Nowhere did Gibson demonstrate that more clearly than in the 23 Norgil stories he wrote for Street & Smith's *Crime Busters* and *Mystery* magazines. "I was called on for a magician story for the first issue, so I gave my character the name of Norgil, which he formed by juggling the letters of his actual name, which was Loring. He could also change it to Ling Ro, a title which he used when called upon to perform wizardry in Chinese costume. "

Gibson based his fictional "prestidigitective" on his real-life friends from the world of stage magic: legendary headliners including Houdini, Blackstone, Thurston and John Calvert. "For Norgil, I took the prototype of a traveling magician who was playing vaudeville or lesser shows," Gibson explained. "I took Blackstone ... because he was that kind of performer. I had him a little smaller-time than Blackstone because he was playing lesser towns. And often, he would book a town because there was some crime to be discovered there."

Which is exactly what happens in "The Chest of Ching Ling Foo," a tale from the September 1939 issue of *Crime Busters* that incorporates a relic from a legendary turn-of-the-century magic act into its plot.

Ching Ling Foo (1854-1922) was the first Asian magician to achieve international fame. Born "Chee Ling Qua" in the Peking suburb of Yang Tsnann, Foo launched his magic act in 1897 and quickly became a favorite of Chinese aristocrats. Arriving in San Francisco two years later, he joined a troupe of Chinese performers to perform at the Omaha Exposition which led to vaudeville bookings and an extended New York engagement at Keith's Theatre. Foo amazed American audiences by breathing fire and producing ribbons and a 15-foot long pole from his mouth. His most famous illusion was producing from thin air a giant bowl of water claimed to weigh eighty pounds.

"From New York, Ching Ling Foo toured the United States, creating a sensation in every vaudeville theater where he appeared," Walter Gibson recalled in *The Master Magicians.* Harry Houdini proclaimed Ching Ling Foo "the best Chinese magician I had ever seen," while Irving Berlin included the famous Chinese conjurer in the lyrics of his 1917 song, "From Here to Shanghai."

Ching Ling Foo's act was imitated to great success by William Robinson, a former New York book dealer who went on to even greater fame as "Chung Ling Soo." A bitter rivalry soon developed between the Chinese magician and his Brooklyn-born imitator with both claiming the title, "the original Chinese Magician." Their feud ended prematurely on March 23, 1918 when Robinson's "Bullet Catching Trick" went fatally amiss during a London performance. However, the Oriental impersonations of Robinson and his successor George Reuschling ("Rush Ling Toy") inspired Norgil's occasional performances as "Ling Ro."

"The Chest of Ching Ling Foo" provides a fascinating backstage pass into the workings of a touring magic show. "Most magic stories that people write, they try to make the magician a little bit fabulous, but I was telling what was going on backstage," Gibson explained in 1980. "I didn't give away too many of the tricks." —Anthony Tollin

Howard Thurston performs a card trick for Walter Gibson.

Harry and Bess Houdini visit Ching Ling Foo and his wife.

NORGIL THE MAGICIAN PULLS A NEAT TRICK WITH

THE CHEST OF CHING LING FOO

BY MAXWELL GRANT

CHAPTER I
EAST GOES WEST

THE chest of Ching Ling Foo stood upon a wheeled platform in the center of an otherwise deserted stage. Behind a drawn curtain, under the mild glow of border lights, Norgil the magician gazed fascinated at the relic that had reputedly belonged to the most famous of Chinese wizards.

It was really something to look at, that chest of Ching Ling Foo. It formed a cube, measuring four feet in each direction; it was painted vermilion, with crisscrossed stripes of black. Studded with beads that resembled tarnished rhinestones, the chest must have been quite glittery in its prime, although time had dulled its appearance.

Some of the studs covered nailheads; others were clustered, to form Chinese characters, on each side of the chest. Unable to read Chinese, Norgil had no idea what the characters meant. They were quite as mysterious as the chest itself.

Steve Cragey, Norgil's advance man, was standing at the wing, talking to Fritz, the magician's chief assistant. Portly Steve was shaking his head as he spoke.

"Norgil has a lot of screwy friends," declared Steve, "and they ship him some of the damnedest junk I ever heard of. But this Chinese chest takes the cake. It's worse than the coyote that the boys sent to Norgil from a dude ranch."

Fritz didn't agree with Steve.

"That's a trick chest," argued the assistant. "It comes from China. Maybe Norgil can use it in the act. That's why he's trying to figure it out."

Steve decided to have a closer look at the chest of Ching Ling Foo. As Steve approached, Norgil turned around. Tightening his rolled-up sleeves, the magician mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, gestured toward the garish chest, and stated:

"Carvo sent it, Steve. You know him, The Great Carvo. He just came in from China, after a world tour. The Chinaman that sold him this thing said it used to belong to Ching Ling Foo, so Carvo thought I'd like to own it."

Turning to the chest, Norgil began to probe some of the tarnished studs, searching for hidden springs.

"I've had it open a couple of times," said the magician. "It's easy enough, working from the outside. What I'm trying to find is how to open it from the inside. I think the thing is a Chinese version of an escape trick."

Steve had a different opinion of the matter.

"The last I heard of Carvo," he gruffed, "the fellow was stranded in Siam or Singapore, or one of those places. You sent him a couple of thousand bucks, so he could get home. Well, The Great Carvo is back in America, and he ships you this"—Steve gave a half-kick at the Chinese chest—"in return for your cash. Fine going, Norgil."

Chuckling, the magician drew a letter from his pocket. From its folds he produced a draft on a San Francisco bank.

"Carvo sent me my money, too," said Norgil, "with interest. The Chinese chest is just an added token of his appreciation. Carvo is in the money, Steve, like I said he would be."

Mollified, Steve raised his eyebrows as if he wanted to hear more. Norgil referred to the letter.

"The Great Carvo has a new backer," explained Norgil, "a promotor named Tom Gayborn. This chap Gayborn not only brought Carvo's show in from China; he's booked Carvo for the opening of the exposition in Iron City.

"Carvo is due in Iron City tomorrow. What say we hop over there, Steve? He'd be tickled pink to see us. We can spare the time, because we have a week's layoff."

Steve objected that it was eight hundred miles to Iron City, with no direct connection. Norgil countered that they could land within forty miles of the town, by taking a regular plane route, and hire a car for the rest of the trip. Norgil's argument won out.

LEAVING Fritz to crate the gaudy chest of Ching Ling Foo and store it with the rest of Norgil's paraphernalia, they headed to the airport, and caught their plane. After a night flight of nearly four hours, they reached a landing spot, hired a coupé, and began their automobile ride to Iron City.

With Steve at the wheel, Norgil smoked away at cigarettes and chatted about The Great Carvo and the chest of Ching Ling Foo. But Steve wasn't particularly interested in things that pertained to magic.

"I don't like this territory," grumbled the portly man, eying the wooded stretches that the headlights showed on every curve. "There's been a lot of stick-ups in this section of the country."

"Hijackers, after cigarette trucks," corrected Norgil. "They won't bother us, Steve. Anyway"—Norgil gestured his cigarette toward a passing road-sign—"it's only fifteen miles more into Iron City."

They forked into another road, and the next mile was one of silence. Then, Steve's apprehension returned as the coupé's motor began to cough. Experiments with the choke and the accelerator brought no results. As the car made its final wheeze, Steve jolted it to the side of the road.

"Out of gas," he groaned. "The fellow said something about filling it, but the gauge looked all right. I guess it registers wrong. We've got to stop another car."

Stepping to the highway, Steve waved his arms at the first few cars that passed. Instead of slackening,

they increased their speed. Steve poked his face through the window, and spoke reprovingly to Norgil.

"I told you this was a bad road," said Steve. "Everybody is afraid to stop. You were smart enough to figure out the chest of Ching Ling Foo. Let's see if you can solve this problem."

OBLIGINGLY, Norgil stepped from his side of the car. He drew a pack of cards from his pocket, and began to toy with the pasteboards. As a car wheeled into sight from the bend, Norgil stepped to the center of the highway.

As calmly as if he stood on his own stage, the magician fanned the pack of cards. Using his free hard, he began plucking the cards one by one, and vanishing them from his fingertips. The headlights of the approaching car cast a brilliant spot upon those clever hands. The driver stopped, at sight of Norgil's manipulations.

"You see?" purred Norgil, to Steve. "My magic works. They know I'm a magician, not a stickup artist."

Steve guffawed. Two men were coming from the other car, and their attire showed that they would have stopped, whether Norgil had done his act or not. They were State police, patrolling this stretch of highway, out from Iron City.

A few minutes of chat settled everything. The cops supplied some gas, and Steve managed to start the coupé's motor. Beside the patrol car, Norgil was shaking hands with the officers, thanking them, and thinking the adventure was ended.

Then, from the chilly night air came the thwacky sound of a revolver shot. It was repeated once; twice—then shots came with a rapidity that resembled a barrage. The sounds were from the direction of the fork. Instantly, the officer at the wheel whipped the patrol car forward.

But the State cops did not begin their drive alone. Forgetting Steve and the coupé, Norgil made a jump for the running board of the patrol car. The magician, too, was riding to the fray, anxious to do his part in aiding the law,

At that moment, Norgil had forgotten the chest of Ching Ling Foo. He was to remember it shortly.

CHAPTER II
DEATH TAKES A FRIEND

BATTLE was raging about a large van that was skewed at an angle across the road, near the fork. It reminded Norgil of an attack of an ancient covered wagon, for men were shooting away from within the van, trying to stave off a horde of foemen.

As for the attackers, they were as savage as any wild tribe of Indians. They had left their cars, haphazard, on the shoulders of the road, and were circling the van, keeping up a steady fire.

They were marksmen, those crooks, as they proved when they saw the approaching lights of the patrol car. Bullets zinged a halting welcome, smashing headlights, and ruining the windshield. As Norgil dropped beside the quickly stopped car, the State Troopers scrambled out through the doors, and took to the brush beside the road.

From there, they began a nibbling attack, daring enough, and steadily effective. Half a dozen crooks were trying to shoot it out with the officers, but with no luck. Coming up beside the deserted patrol car, Norgil saw that the screening crooks were being nicked; while the police were gaining closer range with their fire.

Slowness no longer mattered. Chance for rescue was gone. All gunfire had ended from the van. The crooks beyond the screening cordon had captured the beleaguered vehicle, and were busy rifling it, while the squad of marksmen held back the two officers.

Headlights of halted cars showed Norgil what was happening. The crooks were hurling objects from the van, boxes, crates, trunks, in multitude. Everything that came out was shoved aside to make way for something else.

Gunning crooks were bellowing for their pals to hurry. It was odd, Norgil thought, that the robbers were not packing some of the loot; but as he watched, Norgil saw something even more peculiar.

With the van unloaded and its cargo scattered, the crooks suddenly abandoned all of the swag. At a shouted signal, the whole band made for their cars, leaving the highway strewn with booty that they no longer wanted!

SEEING the crooks in flight, the State patrolmen charged. Norgil could tell where they were by the spurts from their guns, shots that were unanswered by the crooks. Gifted with sudden forethought, Norgil sprang to the wheel of the patrol car and started the blackened vehicle forward, guided by the lights around the van.

Norgil's move was timely. Where one rescue had failed, he supplied another that succeeded.

Coming on to the highway, the overzealous State patrolmen were suddenly circled by the glare of flashlights. Crooks who hadn't reached the cars had dropped back, to spring an improvised trap. They were ready to settle the State cops, in return for the losses that their own tribe had suffered.

The uniformed men were diving for cover that they could never reach. Guns were actually starting their stabs as the converging crooks piled after the police, thinking they had the pair doomed. Then, like an avalanche from nowhere, came the thing that stopped those men of crime.

Hitting a speed close to forty miles an hour, Norgil launched the patrol car out of the darkness, squarely into the middle of the mob. There were wild yells as crooks scattered; those shouts were punctuated by lusty thwacks against the radiator grille as the hurtling car mowed down a trio of victims.

Yanking the wheel, Norgil heard figures flying past the windows. He shoved the brake pedal as he slashed the car toward the van, trying to get two more of the scurrying murderers. Those crooks dived beneath the van, and must have reached a car on the other side. For Norgil could hear the sound of several departing motors.

Those roars that faded into the distance occurred after Norgil had cracked up the patrol car against the bulky van. The magician was slumped, somewhat bewildered, in the midst of his self-made wreckage when the State Troopers extricated him.

The crooks were gone, and there was no way of pursuing them at present, but Norgil was due for congratulations. Whatever the police had done toward thwarting the robbery, Norgil had topped it by rescuing the cops themselves.

Disregarding dead and crippled hijackers, the officers started toward the rear of the van. On their way, they stumbled among the crates and boxes that strewed the road. Their exclamations showed puzzlement. Instead of cases of cigarettes or other merchandise, they were finding a great variety of unfamiliar objects—curious cabinets, odd-shaped metal tables, huge bowls of glass, and stacks of velvet curtains.

Norgil knew what the equipment was. These were the stage properties belonging to a magic show. They could belong to one person only, the man who was due in Iron City—Norgil's friend, The Great Carvo.

SPRAWLED inside the rear of the pillaged van were two dead men, whose rough attire told that they were the van crew. Flinging the rays of his flashlight farther, Norgil saw another huddled figure. Entering the van, he stooped beside the dead shape, turned its face up into the light.

Norgil recognized the aristocratic profile that he had not seen for many months. The third dead man was the magician who had finished a very hazardous round-the-world tour, only to meet death in his homeland —The Great Carvo.

Grimly, Norgil stared at the face of his murdered friend until he heard the State policemen calling him. Cars had arrived, paced by Steve Cragey in the hired coupé. The police were sending the dead and wounded into Iron City while they took up the trail of the hijackers.

Soon the coupé was covering the fifteen miles into town. At the wheel, Steve kept making sidelong looks toward Norgil. Seeking to offer sympathy because of Carvo's death, Steve said:

"It was tough about Carvo. Tough for him, and for you, too, Norgil—"

"Why tough for me?" snapped Norgil, in a sharp tone that was new to Steve. "It's a break for me, Steve"—the magician's laugh had a shrewd note—"because it means that I can put on that show in Iron City, instead of Carvo."

"You can't mean—"

"That I'm going to grab the job for myself? Why not? Listen, Steve, when we get to Iron City, you look up Tom Gayborn, the fellow that's backing Carvo's show. Tell him I'll play the date on percentage."

Steve mouthed a horrified protest that brought a harsh laugh from Norgil. To Steve's way of looking at it, Norgil was showing very little respect for the memory of a dead friend. Norgil argued that, with Carvo gone, the past did not matter. If Steve wanted to hold his job, he'd have to talk to Gayborn about booking Norgil's show.

Silenced, Steve felt that all his admiration toward Norgil had turned to sheer contempt. Between gritted teeth, Steve promised to talk to Gayborn, and present the proposition. It was Steve's job, so he'd go through with it, but he hinted that Norgil might be needing a new advance man, very soon.

Calmly smoking another string of cigarettes, Norgil paid no attention to Steve's remarks. The magician's suave face had become impenetrable.

As they rolled into Iron City, Steve found himself trying to guess what thoughts lay behind Norgil's poker-faced expression.

Had he learned, Steve would still have been quite puzzled.

Norgil was thinking about the chest of Ching Ling Foo.

CHAPTER III
NORGIL MAKES PLANS

FOR a man who had apparently gained just what he wanted, Norgil seemed in a singular mood. Steve Cragey held that opinion as they sat in a hotel room the next afternoon talking with Tom Gayborn.

The promoter had booked Norgil's show into Iron City to take the place of the act that The Great Carvo would never again perform. Norgil's own equipment had arrived by rail and was being transferred to the theater. Yet Norgil did not seem highly pleased about it.

Steve was wondering if the magician had experienced a change of heart. Maybe his better nature had told him that he had done a very small thing, capitalizing on the Carvo tragedy. Steve wasn't sure, for Norgil had not expressed himself upon the subject.

In fact, Norgil had deliberately avoided all talk of The Great Carvo, and he hadn't once mentioned the chest of Ching Ling Foo. Perhaps Norgil was suffering deserved pangs everytime he thought of the gift that he had received from his dead friend, Carvo.

Norgil's mood was not lost on Gayborn. The promoter thought he understood it, which was not surprising. Tom Gayborn was a prepossessing man who had traveled far and often. He had made fortunes, and had sunk them in many sorts of enterprises. He knew human nature and its weaknesses.

Tall, gray-haired, with a long, solemn face, Gayborn had a fatherly air as he stepped toward the window where Norgil was watching the parade that marked the opening of the Iron City exposition.

"I know how you feel about Carvo," spoke Gayborn, in a soothing tone. "He was my friend, too, Norgil. But you shouldn't feel that you did something cheap in taking his place here. If I'd thought you were cheap, I wouldn't have booked you.

"Look at it from this angle: Carvo had other people in his show. He's dead, and that puts them out of jobs. But if you make money here, I'll make money, too. What I make goes to Carvo's troupe."

Gayborn's earnest speech took slow effect. The thing that really roused Norgil from his lethargic mood was a blare of martial music that came from the street below. The Iron City police band was parading past in full uniform at the head of a long procession. The burst of trumpets, the smash of drums, gave Norgil a sudden lift.

A SMILE beneath his pointed mustache, Norgil turned about and extended his hand to Gayborn, who received it with a warm shake. With a sparkle in his eyes, Norgil threw a reproachful glance at Steve. Then, his suavity restored, Norgil suggested:

"Let's go down to the theater, Steve, and arrange for a rehearsal. The show doesn't open until tomorrow night, but there's a lot to do before then."

On the way, Steve was quite apologetic, because he had misunderstood Norgil the night before.

"If I'd only known," began Steve, "that you were concerned about Carvo's troupe, I'd have seen the light. You did good work, getting your thought across to Gayborn."

Norgil shook off the subject with a smile and a shrug. As they neared the theater, he stopped to buy an evening newspaper. With Steve scanning the headlines over his shoulder, Norgil read exactly what he expected.

The police laid the previous night's murder to the mob of hijackers who had been specializing in the robbery of cigarette shipments. The crooks had evidently mistaken Carvo's van for a camouflaged merchandise truck. But the theory had not given the police a trail to the hijackers who had escaped. Those malefactors, and the unknown big shot that ruled them, were still at large, and likely to remain so.

"I'm glad you've seen the light, Steve," purred Norgil, as they approached the magician's dressing room, "because I have a great idea in mind. Since my engagement here in Iron City will be a tribute to The Great Carvo, anything that we do to raise more money will be legitimate, won't it?"

Steve agreed that it would be. Norgil opened the door of the dressing room and pointed to the far wall. Steve stared as he saw the black-and-vermilion chest of Ching Ling Foo.

"I phoned Fritz to unpack it," said Norgil. "I'll have him polish up those rhinestones so they'll look pretty bright. I'll do a Chinese number in the show, featuring the chest of Ching Ling Foo."

"You'll mention that it belonged to Carvo?"

"Of course." Norgil chuckled, in a manner that made Steve's doubts return. "I'll say the trick was Carvo's last legacy, or any other bunk that will bring in the crowd."

Steve grimaced. The thing sounded cheap to him, but he realized that Gayborn probably wouldn't think so. Gayborn, it seemed, had captured Norgil's viewpoint. Yet Steve couldn't dispute the logic of it. They were showmen, both, Norgil and Gayborn. What they did would be in the name of charity. Despite himself, Steve nodded agreement with Norgil's plan.

"It doesn't matter what the trick is like," observed Norgil, idly. "I'll figure out some way to work it in with the usual Chinese routine. Anything that catches the eye will be good enough, and this chest of Ching Ling Foo has what it takes."

Norgil was approaching the squarish chest as he spoke. Half turning, he gave a sweeping gesture.

"I'll have the thing wheeled all around," he told Steve. "The audience will get worked up, wondering what is going to happen when I open the chest. A touch of my finger"— his hand approached one of the glittering nail heads—"and anything might pop up!"

AS Norgil's finger pressed the secret spring, the lid of the chest flew open. It swung upward, on a powerful hinge, making a half revolution in Norgil's own direction. But that wasn't all that happened.

The very thing that Norgil had visualized came true. Something popped up as the box opened!

It came with the speed of a jumping jack—a human figure, as speedy as it was lithe. That form might have been the spirit of the Chinese chest itself, a manifestation of the wizardry that had once belonged to Ching Ling Foo.

The figure that bobbed living from the chest was that of a black-haired Chinese girl, garbed in her native costume. The dark glitter of her slanted eyes was vengeful, as a serpent's glare.

Snakelike, too, was the motion of her slender hand, as it whipped from the folds of her black, dragon-decorated robe. Clutched in her long-nailed fingers was a thin-bladed knife that tapered to a needle point.

The girl's only utterance was a quick-sucked hiss that trembled her ruddy lips. Then, her saffron-tint hand went back across her shoulder; paused, and sped forward in a murderous swing.

Perfect in aim, with only the mere seconds of delay required for her lightning moves, the girl from the Chinese chest flung the knife straight for the heart of Norgil the magician!

CHAPTER IV
OUT OF THE PAST

AS THE Chinese girl started that murderous hurl, Norgil's hands came upward. They did not rise empty. With them, they brought a solid object that had come Norgil's way the moment the chest sprang open.

The object in question was the hinged flap that formed the top of the Chinese chest.

Norgil had often claimed that the hand was quicker than the eye. This was one time when he proved the adage. His hands had plucked the edge of the lid instinctively, the moment that it glanced his knee.

His own action quicker than the girl's, Norgil was raising a flying shield before the knife left those long-nailed fingers. The blade struck the thick square that Norgil thrust into its path. Driving clear through the thick wood of the chest lid, the knife gave a disappointed quiver that ended its swift flight.

Bringing the lid back toward him, Norgil rested his chin on the angled edge and met the girl's gaze. Slanted eyes had gone wide; not through horror, but because of disappointment. Steve was pouncing forward, hoping to grab the Chinese girl before she made another attempt on Norgil's life. But Norgil waved Steve back.

Force wasn't necessary. The girl had launched the lone thrust of which she was capable. Calmly, she was ready to accept whatever happened to her.

Norgil spoke. His tone carried no enmity; not even disapproval. Rather, he struck a note of sympathy and commendation, which the girl recognized.

"You wanted to kill me," he told her, "because of Carvo. You thought that I had some hand in his death."

Dark eyes kept fixed on Norgil's. At last, the girl nodded. Letting the lid descend, Norgil extended his hand to assist the girl from the chest.

"I was Carvo's friend," said the magician, steadily. "I tried to save his life last night. I took his place, not to profit by his death, but to accomplish what you came here to seek—vengeance against a murderer."

The words amazed Steve Cragey. He was beginning to learn things that he hadn't even tried to guess. As for the Chinese girl, she believed Norgil utterly. As she stepped from the chest, she made a profuse apology, in perfect English.

"I was very wrong," she said with a sad smile, "to think that one friend could forget another. I was told that in America, no one was ever subtle, as we are in China. But I find myself mistaken, Mr. Norgil."

THEREWITH the girl told her story. Her name was Lotan Moy; she had joined Carvo's show in China, to serve as an interpreter. She had come to America with the troupe, to visit friends in San Francisco.

"When I heard of Carvo's death," concluded Lotan Moy, "I came here by plane. The newspapers mentioned that you had found Carvo's body"—dark eyes were fixed on Norgil—"and then replaced his show with your own."

"Which looked very bad," agreed Norgil. "A lot of other people didn't like it—Steve here, for one. But in America, people don't usually look for crime behind a business deal. The actual case is that I'm playing a hunch, Miss Moy, to find out why Carvo was murdered. You're the one person who might supply me with some further facts."

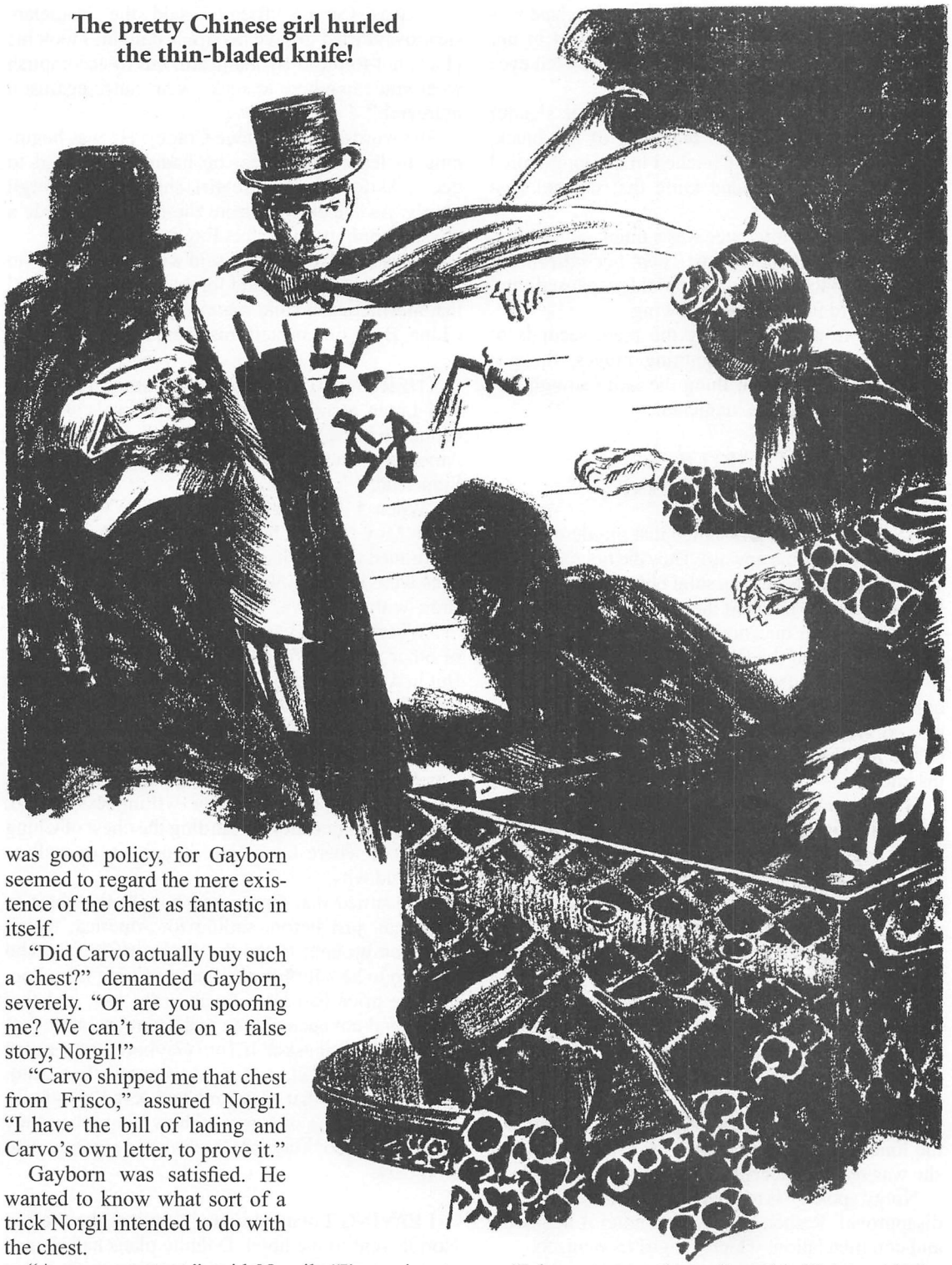
Lotan Moy expressed her willingness to aid. Norgil asked questions regarding the chest of Ching Ling Foo, where Carvo had bought it, as well as when and why.

He learned that Carvo had bought the chest in Shanghai, just before sailing for America; that it had been brought to the theater by a Chinese who claimed to be a former assistant of Ching Ling Foo, that the price had been so absurdly low, and that Carvo had not been able to resist purchasing it.

When Norgil asked if Tom Gayborn knew about the Chinese chest, Lotan Moy shook her head. She explained that Gayborn had left Shanghai a week in advance of Carvo's show; that when they reached Frisco, Gayborn had already gone on to Iron City.

LEAVING Lotan Moy and Steve at the theater, Norgil went to the hotel. Definite plans had shaped in the magician's mind; the meeting with Lotan Moy had strengthened them. Stopping at the hotel desk, Norgil picked up some messages, then went to see Tom Gayborn, who was in his room.

Norgil told Gayborn about the chest of Ching Ling Foo. He omitted mention of Lotan Moy, which



The pretty Chinese girl hurled the thin-bladed knife!

was good policy, for Gayborn seemed to regard the mere existence of the chest as fantastic in itself.

"Did Carvo actually buy such a chest?" demanded Gayborn, severely. "Or are you spoofing me? We can't trade on a false story, Norgil!"

"Carvo shipped me that chest from Frisco," assured Norgil. "I have the bill of lading and Carvo's own letter, to prove it."

Gayborn was satisfied. He wanted to know what sort of a trick Norgil intended to do with the chest.

"An escape stunt," said Norgil. "I'm going to get inside the thing and try to work my way out. It may take me several attempts to get the hang of it, though."

Frowning at the messages that he held in his hand, Norgil made a mental calculation.

"I have to see the police chief," he said, "to confirm some local testimony regarding that gun fight on the road. Some State cops are calling, too, but I'll have them steered over to the theater. I can talk to them, while Fritz and the boys are setting stage."

"What time is the rehearsal?" asked Gayborn.

"At seven thirty," replied Norgil. "Steve will arrange for the orchestra to be there. I'll shoo everybody out of the place, State cops and all. We'll have the Rialto Theater all to ourselves when I try out the new trick. Come around and look it over, Gayborn."

Norgil's schedule ran almost to the dot. The orchestra arrived soon after seven, and at half past, Norgil saw the State police out through the stage door. Their car was pulling away when Norgil slipped his arms into a crimson mandarin robe and adjusted a yellow mask upon his face.

Curtains drew back as Norgil stepped on stage, to become the center of a gorgeous setting where Chinese screens and dragon statues rivaled the taborets and curious caskets that were used in the magician's usual Oriental act.

Tinkly music came from the ten-piece orchestra. Looking across the pit, Norgil saw Tom Gayborn, seated beside Steve Cragey. Those two constituted the entire audience; nevertheless, Norgil warmed up by performing a Chinese paper-tearing trick.

A spotlight fixed itself upon Norgil's disguised features. He smiled blandly, for his lips were visible beneath the edge of the half mask. Bowing as he finished the restoration of a torn strip of tissue paper, Norgil glanced across his shoulder, at the chest of Ching Ling Foo, which stood on its platform, near the center of the stage.

For the first time, Norgil saw that chest under the glare of a spotlight. Fritz had done a good job polishing the decorations. The spotlight's glow did the rest. Glittering with bejeweled brilliance, the chest of Ching Ling Foo was a thing of splendor.

At that sight, Norgil knew that every hunch he had followed was a correct one. The last link of Carvo's death was complete. The answer had crashed to Norgil's mind like the cymbal strokes from the orchestra.

Norgil had solved crime's riddle, along with the secret that belonged to the mysterious chest of Ching Ling Foo!

CHAPTER V
CROSSED CRIME

DESPITE THE soft strains of the orchestra a grim hush seemed to control the Rialto Theater as Norgil stepped toward the chest of Ching Ling Foo. The spotlight was gone; the brilliant chest had dulled as the stage went partially dim.

Houselights had risen at Norgil's cue, showing vast spaces of theater seats, deserted except for the pair that Steve and Gayborn occupied. Those lights showed a contrivance hanging from the dome of the theater—a miniature pagoda, painted a turkey red.

Part of the equipment used in Norgil's regular Chinese act, the pagoda was always hanging from the dome when the curtain rose. Neither Steve nor Gayborn noticed it, however. Their attention was fixed on the chest of Ching Ling Foo.

There was something else that no one noticed; not even Norgil. Stealthy figures were moving into the Rialto Theater, creeping men who came by the stage door and the unlocked exits. They were taking over the theater, unmolested; crooks of the same brand as those who had murdered The Great Carvo!

Imperturbably, Norgil pressed a jeweled stud at the side of the Chinese chest. The top flung open. Stepping into the chest, Norgil folded his arms, and bowed in mandarin style. Tinkly music lulled, while Norgil spoke words in pidgin English.

"All watch!" he chirped. "Maybe for long time I stay here; maybe not. You see."

Dropping down into the chest, Norgil pulled the lid shut with him. There was a *click* as it clamped in place. No longer was the magician a solitary figure, dominating the stage. Only the Chinese chest held full attention.

Not for long.

With concerted action, a dozen men surged upon the stage. Some came from the wings; others from aisles, where they had lurked. A pair reached the Chinese chest. The others flocked for the footlights, flanked by a few who stayed on the steps that led from audience to stage.

All wore masks; all carried revolvers. They brandished the weapons toward the orchestra, also covering Steve and Gayborn, who sat beyond the pit. One crook, acting as leader of the tribe, snarled an order to the orchestra:

"Keep playing!"

The musicians obeyed. Busy with their instruments, they saw two crooks wheeling the Chinese box around, prepared to roll it from the stage. Thugs intended to carry off that trophy with Norgil a prisoner inside it!

There was a groan from Steve Cragey—one that Tom Gayborn echoed. To Steve this was the tightest fix that Norgil had ever encountered—a predicament that rendered the magician helpless, while not a hand could be lifted to help him.

Steve forgot that the fix was of Norgil's own making, Those crooks on the stage were due for a surprise. It came with startling suddenness, a clatter from the hanging pagoda that dangled beneath the theater dome.

The sides of the pagoda fell away. A revolver shot ripped loud above the frantic music of the orchestra. The report issued from the breakaway pagoda; and crooks saw the man responsible. So did Steve. Gaping upward, he gasped.

"Norgil!"

WITHIN the remains of the pagoda, the man with the mandarin mask was leveling his own gun toward the stage. The only crooks who had the proper angle to combat him were the two who had started to wheel away the Chinese chest. They sprang about, lifting their guns.

There was another clatter, as the chest lid shot open. Wheeling amazed, the crooks found themselves faced by the original mandarin—the real Norgil.

The magician had not left the chest of Ching Ling Foo. The double in the pagoda was Fritz, wearing a duplicate costume. Norgil had planted him in the pagoda, a half hour before rehearsal time, in preparation for this very climax.

Norgil here; Norgil there—the thing had the crooks befuddled. But they were a dozen against a pair, those crooks. Twelve guns to three, for Norgil held a brace of weapons. As Norgil and Fritz began to shoot, the crooks sprang for cover, figuring that they would win a rapid victory, despite a few casualties.

In their hurry, crooks forgot the orchestra.

Instruments clattered; but their rattle lacked music. Strings and brasses were tossed in a pile, with traps and snare drums. Ten men were drawing guns as they came over the footlights, a human tidal wave.

The musicians delivered a volley that showed them to be marksmen. Crooks, sprawling right and left, saw badges flashing in the light. Jabbing a few added shots across the edge of the Chinese chest, Norgil wore his bland smile.

Almost the same smile that he had shown that afternoon, when he saw the police band parading past Gayborn's window. In his visit to the police chief, Norgil had announced that he expected an invitation at the theater, and had suggested a way to bring the crooks into a perfect trap.

It was Norgil, not Steve, who had arranged for the orchestra. Not the one employed by the theater, but a special quota of musicians, picked from the police band!

Wearing playing clothes, the cops had strolled into the theater under the very eyes of spying crooks. Carrying musical instruments that they knew how to use, these officers had passed muster from start to finish. Their guns had done the rest. The law had gained full command. Crooks, whimpering and wounded, were being rounded up from all corners.

Norgil alone was looking toward the audience. He saw Gayborn speak to Steve, then rise shakily and start out along an aisle. Vaulting from the Chinese chest, Norgil shouted after him. Frantically, Gayborn yanked a gun, took aim for the magician.

There was no need for Norgil to fire. Gayborn went suddenly rigid; let his gun fall, as his hands came up. A crouched figure had come up from a theater seat, to press a revolver muzzle against the tall man's neck. Tom Gayborn, crime's big shot, was trapped like his motley mob. Gayborn's captor was Lotan Moy.

WHEN crooks had been removed from the theater, Norgil, his yellow mask discarded, explained things to Steve Cragey. Two listeners were close at hand—the police chief, who had come with the orchestra as a piccolo player, and Gayborn, who sat scowling at his handcuffs.

"I had my first hunch on the highway," stated Norgil, "right after Carvo's murder. Those crooks took everything out of the van, but carried nothing away. They were looking for something that they didn't find.

"It could only have been the chest of Ching Ling Foo, for it really belonged with Carvo's apparatus. Since I happened to have the chest, I knew that it would be the right bait for the crooks, once they learned I owned it."

Norgil swung to Gayborn; met the big shot's ugly glare.

"You were the one man who could have arranged it all," accused Norgil. "In Shanghai, you had a Chinese agent sell the chest to Carvo, after you had left. When you booked Carvo into Iron City, you arranged his transportation, too.

"You hired the thugs to attack the van, so that they could steal the chest. As Carvo's backer, a man who would lose some money by his death, you had a swell alibi. But you didn't know that Carvo had sent the chest to me, instead of keeping it for his own show."

Gayborn began to snarl denials. Lotan Moy interrupted him. She was repeating facts that she had told to Norgil—testimony that fitted with everything the magician had said. Gayborn grimaced, then made a final effort.

"If I'd wanted that chest," he sneered, "I could have brought it to America myself. Your accusations are ridiculous, Norgil. What would I want with that piece of junk?"

"I wondered about that," conceded Norgil, "until tonight, when the puzzle solved itself."

Norgil snapped his fingers toward the projection booth. The cue brought the spotlight. The chest of Ching Ling Foo became resplendent. Steve Cragey gasped, realizing that the decorations were real gems, not rhinestones. Steve uttered one word:

"Diamonds!"

"About two hundred thousand dollars' worth," calculated Norgil. "Gayborn used Carvo as a dupe to smuggle them, right under the noses of the customs officials. Gayborn knew that no one would suspect them, the way they had been dulled and plastered

over a trick chest, like cheap glass beads. This chest came right through, duty free, with the rest of Carvo's gaudy apparatus. Carvo had a perfect reputation; his word for all his equipment was taken."

When the police chief had marched Gayborn out through the stage door, Norgil turned to Steve.

"The show opens tomorrow night," purred Norgil. "All the cash we take in goes to Carvo's family and his troupe. We can double the price, and still pack those seats"—Norgil's gesturing hand circled the empty theater, and pointed finally to the stage—"when people hear about the chest of Ching Ling Foo!"

THE END

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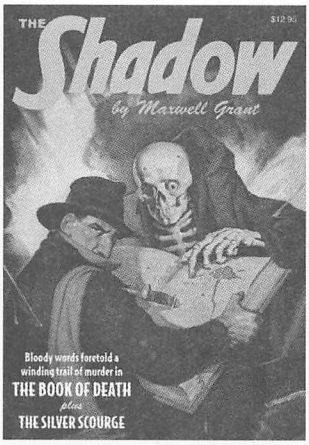

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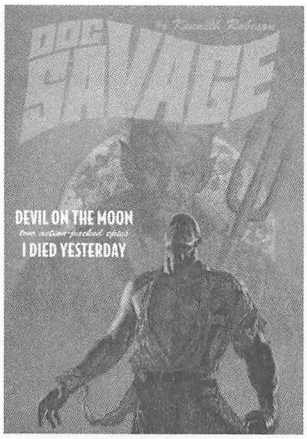

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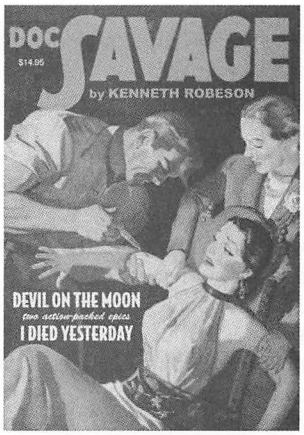

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MEET THE WRITERS

LAURENCE LOUIS DONOVAN was one of the most prolific and versatile pulp fictioneers of his era. Born in Cincinatti, Ohio in July 1885, he worked as a press feeder in Covington, Kentucky before becoming a newspaperman. Donovan later became a copyreader and journalist for the San Francisco *Call-Bulletin* and the *Vancouver Sun,* as well as city editor for the *Spokane Chronicle.*

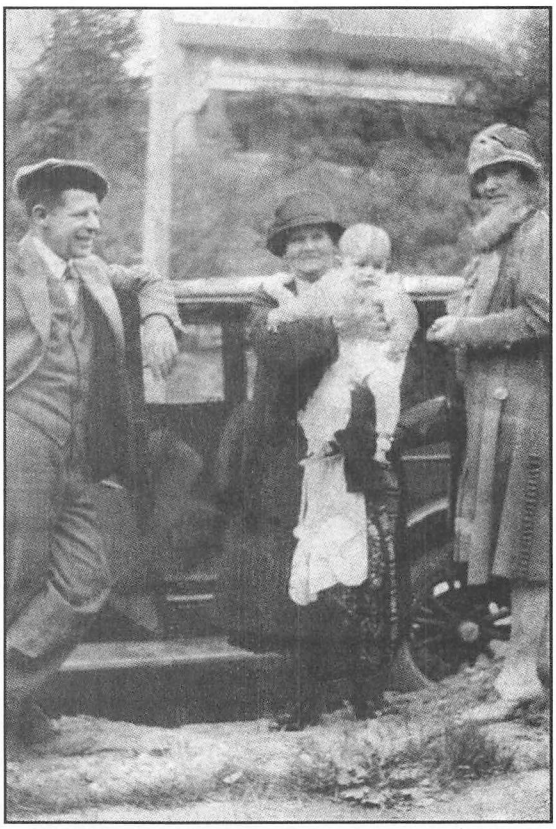
During the late '20s, he began contributing to myriad pulp magazines ranging from the dignified *Argosy* to the bizarre *Zeppelin Stories.* Prior to that, he appears to have toiled in Hollywood. Family legend has it that Donovan was offered the chance to script the 1925 silent screen version of *Ben Hur*, but went off on one of his infamous drinking binges, blowing the chance forever. That same year, his vignette, "The Old Copy Desk," was published in *The Saturday Evening Post.*

Donovan broke into Street & Smith in 1929 via the story "Brick Sacrifices," written for *Sport Story Magazine.* By 1933, he was writing for Street & Smith editor John L. Nanovic, contributing short stories to the back pages of *The Shadow, Doc Savage*, and *Nick Carter, Pete Rice* and others, sometimes under the house name of "Walter Wayne." In the pages of S&S's *Detective Story Magazine, Clues* and *Western Story Magazine,* he employed the bylines "Patrick Everett" and "Patrick Lawrence"—both cobbled together from the names of his two sons.

Donovan wrote virtually the entire first issue of Street & Smith's *Movie Action*, converting to novelettes such then current film scripts as *Tumbling Tumbleweeds, The Crime of Dr. Crespi, Bodyguard, Powder-Smoke Range, The Last Days of Pompeii, Drake the Pirate* and *Moonlight on the Prairie* under his own name.

In 1935, Nanovic asked him to write Doc Savage novels under the house name of "Kenneth Robeson," alternating with originating author, Lester Dent. After producing nine Docs, Donovan drew on his nautical background to create Captain John Fury for S&S's *The Skipper.* While writing The Skipper as "Wallace Brooker," he launched *The Whisperer*, also for Street & Smith. This time he was "Clifford Goodrich."

When those magazines folded in the aftermath of the October 1937 stock market crash, Donovan continued both characters in the back pages of *The Shadow* and *Doc Savage*, and began ghosting the adventures of Pete Rice in *Wild West Weekly* as "Austin Gridley." His "Boxcar" Reilly character began appearing in *Crime Busters* in 1937, as did postal inspectors Joe Bimbo and Howdy Hawks, whom he had originated for *The Feds.*



Laurence Donovan and his family.

After a liquor-induced falling out with John Nanovic in 1938, Donovan moved over to the rival Standard Magazines, where he began ghosting the adventures of The Phantom under the house name of "Robert Wallace." There he created The Phantom's teenage sidekick, Chip Dorlan. For Standard, Donovan ultimately ghosted episodes of most of their heroes, including G-Man Dan Fowler, The Masked Detective and The Black Bat. One of his 1942 Black Bat novels, *The Murder Prophet*, was a rewrite of "The Crime Prophet," an unpublished Whisperer novel.

Concrete information on Donovan's life is scanty. He claimed to have been born in County Cork, Ireland, but U. S. records do not support this assertion—although his parents were Irish. Although he invariably spelled his first name as Laurence, it might have been Lawrence at birth. Mysteriously, The Shadow's Walter B. Gibson remembered that Donovan changed his name from something like Donegal.

Laurence Donovan married Ruth Johnson in 1924. They were living in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1927, when their son, Laurence Junior, was born.

Another son, Patrick, came along a year later, while the family was living in Spokane. The family moved often, residing in Flushing, New York; Southampton, Long Island; and Old Greenwich, Connecticut, before relocating to Florida. They lived in St. Augustine and, later, Fort Pierce. Laurence Donovan deserted Ruth in the late 1930s, subsequently divorcing her. A reported earlier marriage produced a third son, name unknown. A seasoned sailor, Donovan may have belonged to the Merchant Marines in his younger days. His other pen names included "Don Lewis," "Don Lawrence," and "Larry Dunn," by which Donovan concealed his identity in the lurid *Spicy Detective Stories* and sister magazines like *Spicy Western stories*. His "Pa" Howdy stories ran in *Detective Fiction Weekly* and *Clues* in the 1930s, and in *G-Men Detective* a decade later. Joe Bunt appeared in *Popular Detective*, as did Wildcat Martin, who also ran in *Exciting Detective.* Strangely, three of his Doc Savage novels were "adapted" as early Superman comic book stories. Donovan is also believed to have written for radio. He all but disappears from the pulps after 1949. His last known published story was "Redheads Kill Easy," for Popular Publications' *New Detective,* February 1952. It was a final "Pa" Howdy story. He is believed to have died in a New York hotel circa 1950.

—Will Murray

WALTER B. GIBSON (1897-1985) was born in Germantown, Pennsylvania. His first published feature, a puzzle titled "Enigma," appeared in *St. Nicholas Magazine* when Walter was only eight years old. In 1912, Gibson's second published piece won a literary prize, presented by former President Howard Taft who expressed the hope that this would be the beginning of a great literary career. Building upon a lifelong fascination with magic and sleight of hand, Gibson became a frequent contributor to magic magazines and worked briefly as a carnival magician. He joined the reporting staff of the *Philadelphia North American* after graduating from Colgate University in 1920, moved over to the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* the following year and was soon producing a huge volume of syndicated features for NEA and the Ledger Syndicate, while also ghosting books for magicians Houdini, Thurston, Blackstone and Dunninger.

A 1930 visit to Street & Smith's offices led to his being hired to write novels featuring The Shadow, the mysterious host of CBS' *Detective Story Program.* Originally planned as a quarterly, *The Shadow Magazine* was promoted to monthly publication when the first two issues sold out and, a year later, began the twice-a-month frequency it would enjoy for the next decade. He eventually wrote 283 Shadow novels totaling some 15 million words.

Gibson scripted the lead features for *Shadow Comics* and *Super-Magician Comics,* and organized a Philadelphia-based comic art shop utilizing former *Evening Ledger* artists. He also found time for radio, plotting and coscripting *The Return of Nick Carter, Chick Carter, The Avenger, Frank Merriwell* and *Blackstone the Magic Detective.* He wrote hundreds of true crime articles for magazines and scripted numerous commercial, industrial and political comic books, pioneering the use of comics as educational tools. In his book, *Man of Magic and Mystery: a Guide to the Work of Walter B. Gibson,* J. Randolph Cox documents more than 30 million words published in 150 books, some 500 magazine stories and articles, more than 3000 syndicated newspaper features and hundreds of radio and comic scripts. Walter also hosted ABC's *Strange* and wrote scores of books on magic and psychic phenomena, many co-authored with his wife, Litzka Raymond Gibson. He also wrote five *Biff Brewster* juvenile adventure novels for Grosset and Dunlap (as "Andy Adams"), a *Vicki Barr, Air Stewardess* book and a *Cherry Ames, Nurse* story (as "Helen Wells"), *The Twilight Zone* and such publishing staples as *Hoyle's Simplified Guide to the Popular Card Games* and *Fell's Official Guide to Knots and How to Tie Them.*

No one was happier than Walter when The Shadow staged a revival in the sixties and seventies. Walter wrote *Return of The Shadow* in 1963 and three years later selected three vintage stories to appear in a hardcover anthology entitled *The Weird Adventures of The Shadow.* Several series of paperback and hardcover reprints followed and Gibson wrote two new *Shadow* short stories, "The Riddle of the Rangoon Ruby" and "Blackmail Bay." A frequent guest at nostalgia, mystery, and comic conventions, Gibson attended the annual Pulpcon and Friends of Old-Time Radio conventions on a regular basis, always delighted to perform a few magic tricks and sign autographs as both Gibson and Grant, using his distinctive double-X signature. His last completed work of fiction, "The Batman Encounters—Gray Face," appeared as a text feature in the 500th issue of *Detective Comics.*

Walter Gibson died on December 6, 1985, a recently-begun Shadow novel sitting unfinished in his typewriter. "I always enjoyed writing the *Shadow* stories," he remarked to me a few years earlier. "There was never a time when I wasn't enjoying the story I was writing or looking forward to beginning the next one." Walter paused and then added, a touch of sadness in his voice, "I wish I was still writing the *Shadow* stories."

So do I, old friend. So do I.

—Anthony Tollin

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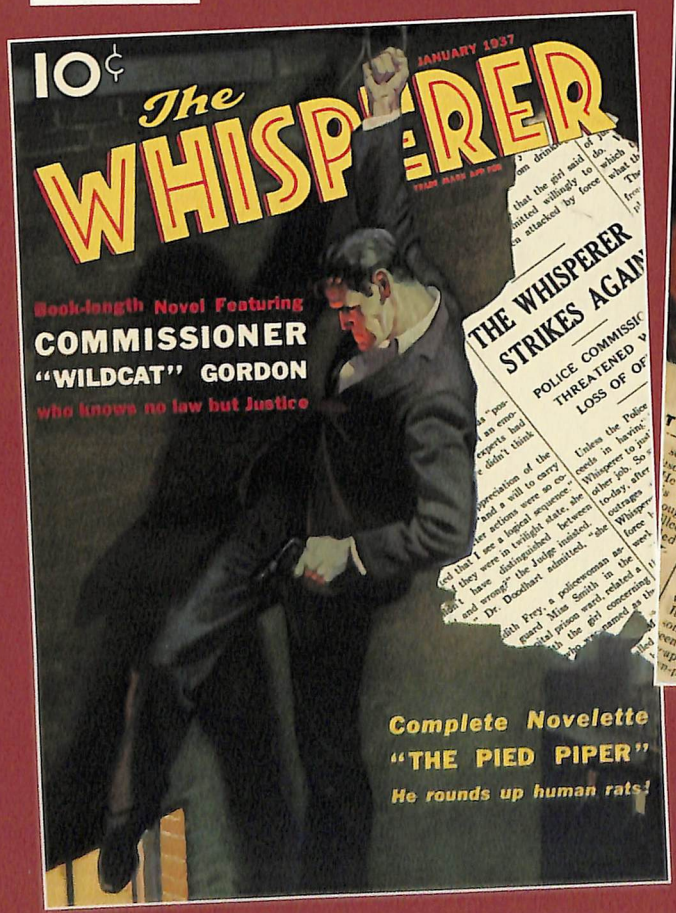

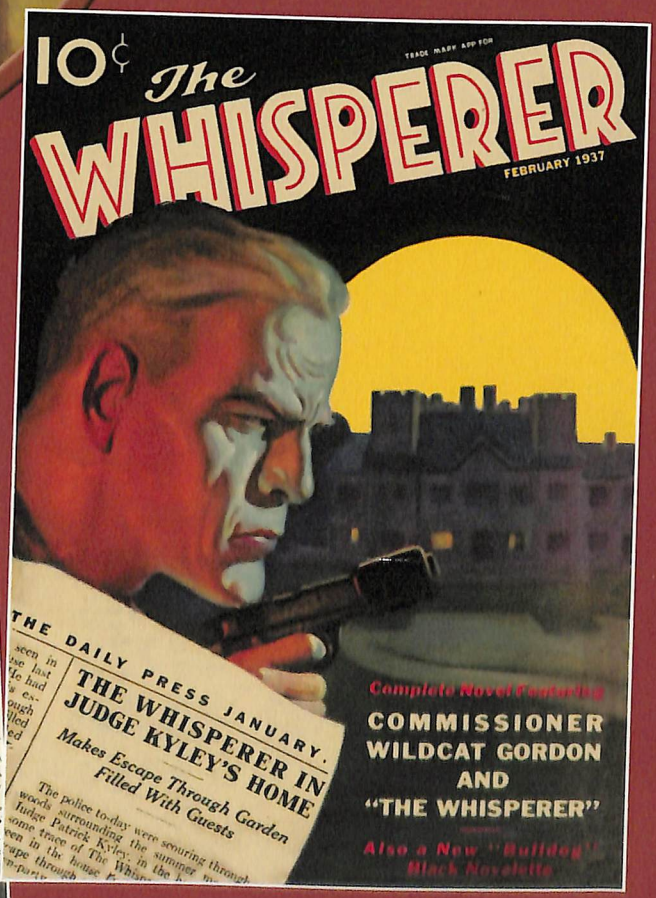

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